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MAY

This month



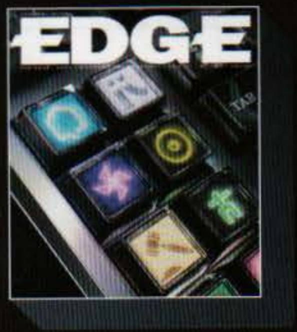








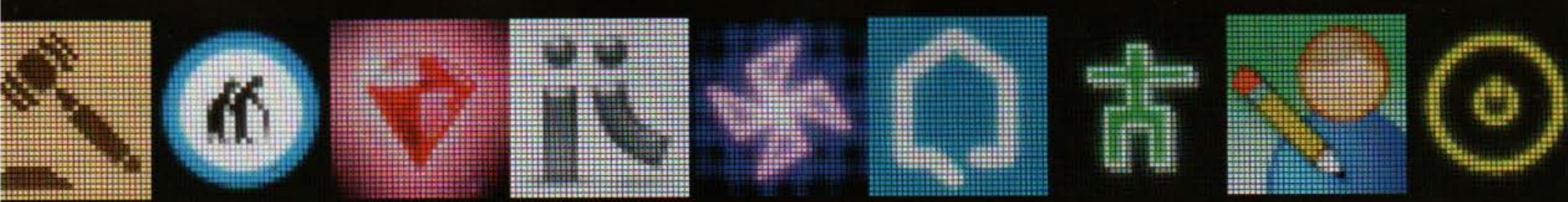
Every month



Sitting down to look ten years into the future is always a nerve-wracking procedure. Doing it just after putting together a series of compilations of early **Edge** reprints ups the intimidation factor tenfold. It's a stark reminder of what a long time a decade is in the games business – *Resident Evil* making its debut, 3DO ramping up for the M2, new kids Sony smack-talking the N64.

But while it's clear how much has changed, and that much more will inevitably change, what's harder to gauge is the pace. Are we speeding up or slowing down? Looking back, it's easy for progress to feel very marginal now. Phil Harrison's powerhouse defence of the switch to the revolutionary CD-ROM was inevitably more compelling than the argument for the evolutionary Blu-ray. But, while the technological advances may be more incremental, what a look to the future shows is that the scope and structure of the industry as a whole is unfolding at a breakneck pace. Starting on p62, we examine the trends which will shape that evolution – changes to game design, changes to the business model, changes to technology, changes to the audience, changes to the social context. Some are old themes, but some wouldn't have been thought of as considerations only a few years ago. Don't be deceived: the future is as strange a country as it ever was.

But if all this future-gazing is leaving you a little lost, or if the end of the current run of the File reprints has meant you're a little forlorn, never fear: **Edge** Presents returns on April 26, with a 258-page edition dedicated to videogame art, featuring exclusive imagery and interviews with key game artists.



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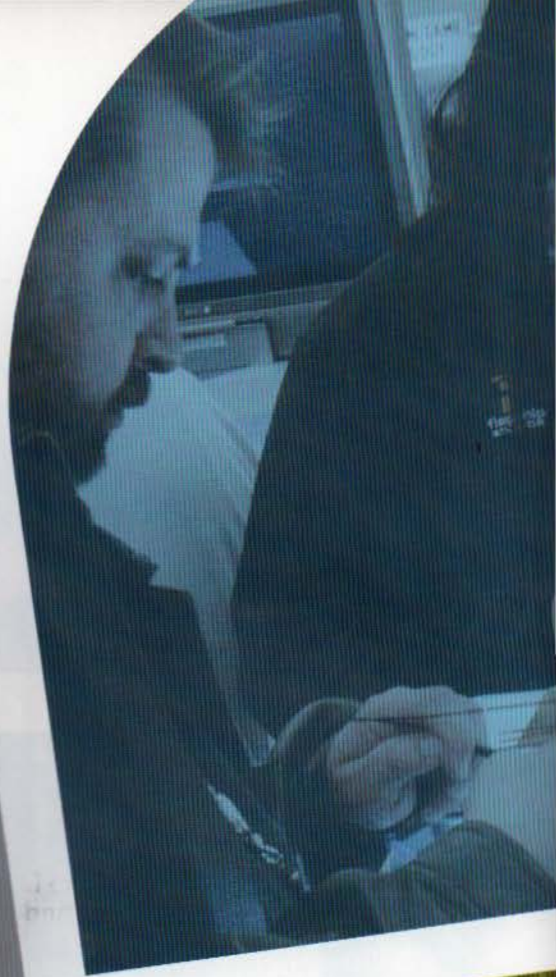


Review

START

START





Developing partnerships that are anything but C++







EVENT

GDC turns 20

Two decades on from a meeting in Chris Crawford's living room, the Game Developers Conference takes over San Francisco

At last year's GDC, the essential accessory was a DS – everyone who was anyone was making the most of their freebie copy of *Brain Training* and PictoChatting their comments to colleagues in the front row. It did as clear a job as anything of representing the spirit that was to dominate gaming for the next year. But this year the essential accessory was, astonishingly, a wife.

It was **Shigeru Miyamoto** who set the tone, using his keynote to present an extended and intensely personal explanation of his commitment

After coming home late from work this Valentine's Day to find his wife enjoying the Everybody Votes channel, Miyamoto was certain of his new vision for gaming

to the thinking that Wii and DS represent. His "wifeometer" – described to the hilarity of the adoring audience as his way of judging how much non-gamers care about his games – had for years remained unmoved by the games he made. The GameCube, with its enlarged A button, was a "half-step", but it was only with the new generation of machines designed expressly for an "expanded audience" that the wifeometer started to budge. And after coming home late from work this Valentine's Day to discover his wife enjoying a midnight session on the Wii's *Everybody Votes* channel, he described being finally certain of the success of his new vision for gaming.

What emerged was that, despite Miyamoto's status as the game developer's game developer, he views himself resolutely as an entertainer, saying that while some games may be good for your soul, and others good for your brain, he simply tries to make all his games fun, a goal he maintained by picturing the face of the player at all points of the development process.

Not that Miyamoto painted a purely fluffy picture. His tale of the Mii's troubled genesis – from a Famicom disk system app, to a component of the N64DD's suite of user-created content tools, to the cancelled *Stage Debut* for the GameCube, to its final form on the Wii – painted the picture of a man willing to persevere for nearly two decades to find the right expression of a dearly held idea.

And, for all the contrasts between the two companies, that emphasis on entertainment was equally apparent in Sony's keynote, delivered by **Phil Harrison**. Expounding his theory of "Game



Finally settled in its new home in all three sections of San Francisco's immense Moscone Center, this was the slickest, but also the most overwhelming Game Developers Conference yet

3.0" – where Game 1.0 was static hardware, and static software; Game 2.0 was online-connected hardware but still static, disc-based software; and the PS3 was the standard bearer (alongside Wii and 360) of a new generation, with connected hardware and adaptive software – he debuted three Sony projects: PS3's *SingStar*, the new Home service and last month's cover game *LittleBigPlanet*. There was a time when perhaps none of these products, with their emphasis on performance, user-created content and communication, might





Miyamoto's charmismatic speech was simultaneously translated by Bill Trinen, NoA's star localiser. Covering both Miyamoto's understanding of Nintendo's core values as well as his explanation of his own, the talk over-ran, producing the extraordinary site of developers walking out early

have been considered a game, but it was clear from this year's conference that that time has long since passed.

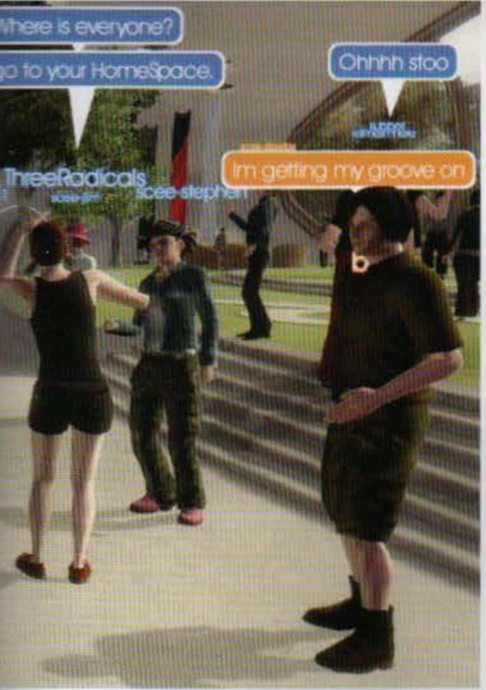
SingStar was the least interesting presentation, simply demonstrating much of the infrastructure (song downloads, EyeToy video uploads, etc) that had been promised in last year's E3 press conference. More surprising was Home – although the rumours had long been circling of some sort of social hub for PS3, the reality of Home is both more extensive and more limiting than some may have expected.

A 3D visualisation of many of the services offered by the 360's menu-driven front-end, Home forms a lobby to the PS3's main functions. Users create an avatar, meet and talk in rather bland cityscapes, take advantage of the pool tables and arcade machines, make note of the hoardings streaming dynamic advertising (the first feature Harrison pointed out), and then retire to their homes, which can be decorated with furniture and fittings downloaded, either free or charged, from the Sony shop.

Music and video can be streamed from the PS3's hard-drive, to share with visiting friends, and one



Split across the Moscone Center's three giant halls, this year's GDC called for considerably more legwork. Despite attempts by the organisers to foster a cosy atmosphere as in San Jose, attendees tended to scatter at the end of each day









PS3's new Home service, available for download in the autumn, set the tone for Sony's entertainment-focused keynote. Reactions were mixed, with some attendees seeing it as the PS3's missing killer app, and others expressing reservations about it being geared more to advertisers than gamers or as little more than a novelty

section in your house is dedicated to a gigantic trophy room where you can choose which of your gaming achievements to display to your friends.

The presentation – perhaps not entirely the final word on the subject, because Home doesn't debut until the autumn – was a little underwhelming, with the environments recalling the sterility of *Test Drive Unlimited*'s houses and the stilted avatar animation generating comments from a number of watching developers. However, the value of this virtual space, particularly when Harrison outlined how game publishers (indeed perhaps even game magazines) as well as other companies, may design and maintain their own homes, in which players can explore and examine their products, is much harder to predict. While its capacity to extend the personal expression and social networking of the likes of MySpace is obvious, those with experience of virtual lobbies know only too well how cumbersome and time-consuming they can be.

It was clear the developer audience was not bowled over by it, perhaps already foreseeing being pestered by marketing departments keen to take advantage of the fully physics-modelled, interactive 3D display space Home offers.

What did provoke cheers of applause was *LittleBigPlanet*, which demonstrated all of the potential outlined in last month's feature. What was remarkable was how many of Home's features it mimicked (avatar and environment customisation, socialising, image and movie sharing), in a radically different, game-focused setting. Which of the two products generates the liveliest community will reveal a lot about the tastes of the PS3's initial demographic.

But if the Sony keynote was a wife-free zone, others were quick to step into the breach. Eiji Aonuma, in his searingly honest account of *Zelda*'s time in the wilderness after the commercial disappointment of *The Wind Waker*, was reliant on his wife's love of the Wii version of *Twilight Princess* to silence any lingering doubts about the game's conversion to Remote control. His tale of his depression as the series became increasingly overcomplicated, climaxing in his humiliating demotion by a frustrated Miyamoto, painted a grim picture of the strain of carrying the world's best-loved game forward.

Eiji Aonuma was reliant on his wife's love of the Wii version of Twilight Princess to silence any lingering doubts about the game's conversion to Remote control

But if Aonuma's session was sobering, Tsutomu Kouno's (the creator of *LocoRoco*) was inspiring. An account of the trials he had to endure to get his game made, including three straight rejections, was impressively at odds with the tone of effortless silliness the game exudes. And who had made the *LocoRoco* plushes that provoked coos of adoration from the audience? Why, his wife of course.

This more human, more emotional face of gaming was evident throughout the show, with even stalwarts such as Peter Molyneux risking ridicule by showing *Fable 2*'s secret heart – a dog who loves you unconditionally and learns from your behaviour. It was hard to believe it was just four years ago that it seemed daring and inconoclastic for Eric Zimmerman's Game Design Challenge to try to create a playable love story. Indeed that session, once a cornerstone of many attendees' schedules, has been rather boxed in by the explosion of creativity in the industry at large and the student and independent game creation scene in particular. With so many once-taboo game ideas now being





One of the most interesting talks in the Serious Games strand was a call to arms to start game development for the One Laptop Per Child project (below), which represents a potentially huge audience if successful





explored, Zimmerman was forced to turn his attention to input devices, leaving competitors Harvey Smith (*Deus Ex, Area 51: Blacksite*), Alexey Pajitnov (*Tetris, Hexic*) and David Jaffe (*God Of War*) with the headache of designing a game to be played with a needle and thread.

Despite Jaffe's enterprising sew-your-own paper plane simulator, and Smith's elusive fabric-based RPG, only Pajitnov proved equal to the challenge, creating a ruthlessly simple realtime evolution of *Battleships* to take this year's crown.

It was a testimony to GDC's consistently good atmosphere that these kind of open, experimental and personable sessions continue to flourish – even though the conference's new San Francisco home has ended the cosy feel that persisted in San Jose, and despite organisers CMP's ruthlessly efficient monetising of every aspect of the events (most sessions are now available for download as MP3s at www.gdconf.com for around $8/£4).

The continuing success in attracting Japanese speakers – this year also saw a pragmatic and revealing talk by Koji Kondo about his work on Nintendo's musical identity, and a rare chance to hear staff from *Final Fantasy XII* discuss the processes they used to manage the game's troubled development – means that GDC is in little danger of losing its pre-eminence on a growing conference circuit that offers ever-more opportunities to hear the industry's big names take a stand.

And, if nothing else, at least San Francisco is a big enough city to stand it if, next year, everyone decides to bring their wives.

IGF Awards

Now in its ninth year, the Independent Game Festival attracted its widest range of applicants yet. Covering games made by both small-scale and commercial indies, as well as mods and student projects, and offering a prize purse of over $62,500 (£31,800), its role has changed dramatically in recent years. Whereas, over the last few years, the run of booths showcasing the finalists were stalked by representatives from Valve and Live Arcade looking for likely projects to adopt, this year that process had already become part of the establishment, with a number of games already making strong commercial use of direct and episodic distribution – Telltale's *Bone* and *Castle Crashers* among them. And the confidence of the experimental, quirky or shamelessly esoteric was stronger than ever. The strength of the field meant that the spoils were more evenly divided than last year's clean sweep by *Darwinia*. The main honour, the Seumas McNally Grand Prize, went to *Aquaria*, an accomplished and imaginative undersea adventure. The derivative wit of *Everyday Shooter* won it the Design Innovation award, and *Samorost 2* took the prize for best browser-based game. The student showcase was won by *Toblo*, a chaotic, destructable take on capture the flag made by a team at DigiPen, and the best mod was produced by a team from Southern Methodist University, who took *Half-Life 2* and turned it into an adventure game starring a disaffected office worker.

And Yet It Moves

TU Wien
Austria

Aquaria

Bit Blot
USA

Arena Legions: A Rising Shadow

Slitherine Software
UK

Armada Online

EvStream
USA

Armadillo Run

Peter Stock
Canada

Ball Of Bastards

Koln International School Of Design
Germany

Bang! Howdy

Three Rings Design
USA

Base Invaders

DigiPen Institute of Technology
USA

Darkness Over Daggerford (Neverwinter Nights mod)

Ossian Studios
Canada

Blast Miner

Cryptic Sea
USA

Bone: The Great Cow Race

Telltale Games
USA

Bubble Islands

dot-invasion
Switzerland

Castle Crashers

The Behemoth
USA

Euclidean Crisis

Stanford University
USA

Everyday Shooter

Queasy Games
Canada

FizzBall

Grubby Games
Canada

Gamma Bros

Pixeljam, Inc.
USA

Gelatin Joe

DigiPen Institute Of Technology
USA

Golf?

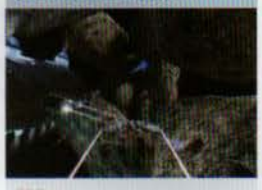
Luke Hetherington Company
USA

Invalid Tangram

Southern Methodist University
USA

Opera Slinger

Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy, USA

Eternal Silence (Half-Life 2 mod)

ES Team
Canada

Racing Pitch

Skinflake
Finland

Roboblitz

Naked Sky
USA

Rooms

SungKyunKwan University
South Korea

Samorost 2

Amanita Design
Czech Republic

Spawns of Deflebub (UT 2004 mod)

Ludocraft
Finland

The Blob

Hogeschool van de Kunsten, Utrecht
The Netherlands

Toblo

DigiPen Institute Of Technology
USA

Toribash

NABI Software
Singapore

Weekday Warrior (Half-Life 2 mod)

Cut Corner Company Productions
USA

Band Of Bugs

NinjaBee
USA

The end of the beginning for PS3

Empty streets, full shelves, satisfied shoppers: Sony puts its money where its mouth is in an unconventional launch



Excitement, disappointment, relief, confusion, embarrassment, astonishment, frustration, elation. For Sony, its fans, and interested observers alike, there were few emotions that weren't evoked by the launch of PlayStation 3 in the UK, Europe and Australia on March 23. Ironies and contradictions were to be found everywhere and, days later, the impact of the console's delayed arrival on its long-term prospects in PAL markets was still no clearer than heads had been on the night.

The expected crowds may have stayed at home, but in London at least, the release of the first consumer PS3s was greeted not with a whimper but a scream. A bizarre midnight launch event at the Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street was almost deserted, short on showmanship, and drastically curtailed by security fears. But Sony's dumbfoundingly generous gift of a 46in HDTV worth around £2,000 to every customer in the queue electrified the tiny crowd as well as grabbing headlines, and eventually the first machine to change hands did so to huge cheers in the centre of a memorably intense media scrum.



The low attendance and lacklustre entertainment – a few rather aimless and embarrassed breakdancers, mostly – made the atmosphere at the Virgin Megastore launch rather cheerless at first. The news of free HDTVs for all comers changed that in short order

The long queues that have been a staple of every console launch in recent memory simply did not materialise: it was the same story elsewhere in the UK and on the continent. Combined with the machine's failure to sell out on preorder – in marked contrast to the many-times-oversold Xbox 360 and Wii – this painted a worrying picture of consumer apathy towards Sony's ambitious and pricy new device. However, again in contrast, a healthy allocation of 220,000 units to UK retail meant that PS3s were readily available in shops for days afterwards, allowing Chart-Track to claim launch weekend sales of 165,000, against 105,000 Wiis and 70,000 360s. Though falling short of PSP's 185,000, this still made it the fastest-selling home console in UK history by some margin. With Sony claiming it was making a million machines available across Europe – far in excess of the initial allocations in Japan and the US – a repeat of this initial success was expected across the continent.

Sony's dumbfoundingly generous gift of a 46in HDTV worth around £2,000 to every customer in the queue electrified the tiny crowd as well as grabbing headlines

The benefits to Sony of waiting to launch in Europe until all the kinks in manufacturing and supply had been smoothed out were clear: speedy sell-through and a lack of consumer frustration on shop floors. Publicity lost is sales gained when demand doesn't outstrip supply. "We've got a situation where, when these guys get home and play it and their mates come round, they don't have to go through that gruelling experience of going down to the store asking for it – and nothing, for weeks on end, which is the sign of a really bad supply chain," said SCE UK managing director **Ray Maguire**, speaking on the night. "We've secured more stock from Japan and I'm just hoping that will be enough to keep it in reasonably free supply." If the machine's disappointing sales performance in the US is anything to go by, though, its initial success may prove short-lived (See 'Parlous States').

The low turnout of the faithful at PS3 launch events spoke volumes about the damage the last few months have done to the PlayStation brand in the territory. After the near-simultaneous global launches of 360 and Wii, PAL gamers are no longer used to a wait for new hardware. The Sony hype machine had run out of steam in the long, painful months since November, drowned out by griping over the delay, the PS3's high price (at £425 and €599, comparatively highe[r] than in other markets) and – in a late, low blow – the announcement mere weeks before release that hardware backward compatibility had been withdrawn and replaced with a software solution, limiting the numbers of PlayStation and PS2 favourites that would play on European units (see 'Backwards thinking').

"I'd encourage everybody to have some perspective," Sony Worldwide Studios president **Phil Harrison** told the midnight launch event. "While the backwards compatibility is somewhat reduced from what's in Japan and the US, we have



over 1,700 titles that are playable today on PlayStation 3. Everybody needs to calm down, and also realise that the games they really want to play are on PS3. And *God Of War 2*," he added with a smile.

Still, just 125 customers had turned up at the Oxford Street Virgin by midnight. A visibly exhausted and frustrated Maguire was naturally quick to lay the blame for the paltry headcount elsewhere. He singled out police fears that the ugly scenes of mugging and disorder that marred PS3's US debut would be repeated in the UK.

"We had a major issue tonight, we basically had the police saying they didn't want any midnight openings. The only reason we were allowed to do this is because our great mates here at Virgin allowed those people inside to sleep over, so we had to limit the numbers to our most ardent fans," Maguire argued, although doubtless even he would have expected Virgin to have to accommodate more than five campers the night before. Active discouragement from the police certainly did keep some customers away, just as it forced nearby Game and HMV to switch their (similarly quiet) launch events to a cold and drizzly early morning; the free cabs home offered to every Virgin customer were perhaps the most welcome side-effect of the warnings. Did Maguire feel the police had got caught up in Sony's own launch hype, and over-reacted? "All I know is that they're the experts," he said diplomatically.

There were plenty of other excuses available – the unseasonal cold, the lack of a looming Christmas, the high price point – but even together



Ritatsu Thomas, the UK's first PAL PS3 owner, enjoys his 15 minutes of fame. It took almost that long for him to nervously confirm his PIN and receive his machine amid the flickering flashbulbs. The sale was a huge release, and relief, for all present

they couldn't quite explain why the queue at HMV's Wii launch in December had been ten times the size. An even starker comparison was with the 2,500-strong mob that had descended on the same store to buy the *World Of WarCraft* expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, back in January. Launch events may not be reliable indicators of sales, but they are fair barometers of public sentiment, and the signs are that excitement surrounding PlayStation 3 is at a dangerously low ebb.

The corollary was that, compared to the razzmatazz of the Wii launch, the Virgin event felt exclusive and clubby, a private affair between an embattled platform-holder and its most loyal fans. In place of hired TV celebs making loud declamations and appearing in grinning photo opportunities, Maguire made the big announcements himself, and Harrison's

Backward thinking

New firmware brings 1,700 PS2 games out to play

PS3's European launch coincided with the release of version 1.6 of the console's firmware, boasting background downloading as its key feature, but also including the emulation software needed for backward compatibility with 1,782 PS and PS2 games. Many notable PS2 games run with 'noticeable issues', and many more don't run at all.

For a full list see http://faq.eu.playstation.com/bc/

Not compatible:
- Amplitude
- Black
- Guitar Hero 1 & 2
- Gradius V
- Gran Turismo 4
- Metal Gear Solid 2
- Manhunt
- Ratchet & Clank series
- Rez
- Soul Calibur 2

Noticeable issues:
- Beyond Good & Evil
- Canis Canem Edit
- Disgaea 2
- Final Fantasy X & X-2
- God Hand
- Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
- Okami
- Pro Evolution Soccer 6
- Resident Evil 4
- Singstar

Newswire

T2 TAKE TWO INTERACTIVE

Take-Two faces boardroom battle

Just as *GTA IV* prepares for its debut, investors representing 46 per cent of shares in Take-Two Interactive were threatening to replace its board of directors or put the company up for sale.

The revolt follows falling revenues and a net loss of $184.9 million (£95 million) in 2006, as well as controversy over the content of the company's games. Take-Two shares had recovered from their $10 low at the time of the Hot Coffee scandal to around the $20 level at the end of March. "A new era may be upon us, but clearly Take-Two has deep-rooted structural issues," Piper Jaffray analyst Anthony Gikas told Reuters.







Gamestation shrugged off police concerns to stage small-scale midnight openings at 200 branches around the country. Reports of one or two muggings did reach the press the following week, but nothing on the scale of the disorder witnessed in the US

Parlous States

How do the sales figures add up?

Although debate continues as to their reliability, February's NPD US sales figures were a stark warning that, once launch fever subsides, PS3 takeup will be even slower than anticipated. At 127,000 units it was outsold by every other console bar the GameCube, and more than twice over by PS2. Meanwhile, Nintendo managed to ship and sell 335,000 Wiis, which with the 485,000 DSes accounted for over half the American hardware market (although only two games were sold for every Wii, indicating a poor attach-rate for the software-starved machine). Things haven't necessarily been looking all that rosy for Microsoft, either. Chief financial officer Chris Lidell cut projected sales of Xbox 360 from 15 to 12 million before the end of June, a worryingly sharp slowdown considering the company just made its milestone of ten million by the end of 2006. It was left to Nintendo to gloat, Reggie Fils-Aimé taking pot-shots at the 360's performance in Europe, which he said was underwhelming outside the UK.

unmistakeable dome was to be seen bobbing high above the crowd, mingling and observing. Harrison gave interviews with only slight reluctance, professing he was really there just to see Sony's baby finally sold in his home territory, where so much vital development for it has taken place.

"I'm happy because we've had hundreds of people in the UK working on games that have come out in Japan and the US before they've come out here, which is the first time that we've had that situation," said Harrison. "Now those games are available here they can show their friends, their wives, their brothers, their sisters, their mums, their dads what they do for a living, what they've been staying up late to do. That makes it worthwhile."

"I'm happy because we've had hundreds of people in the UK working on games that have come out in Japan and the US. Now those games are available here"



While Gamestation customers awaited their consoles at midnight, some Italian gamers had already been enjoying them since Wednesday, after several retailers broke ranks

Sony was no sooner about to forget the loyalty of its hardcore fans than the efforts of its developers. The atmosphere at the event had been so subdued that Maguire had to announce the company's incredible act of largesse – the free TV – three times before the news sunk in, and the stunned attendees began to cheer, hug and high-five. Of course, it was a valuable PR stunt, but given the circumstances there was no reason not to take it as a symbolic thank you and apology to those few who'd kept the faith. "We wanted to thank them for their support because they've been waiting some time for the console. We would be nowhere without them," confirmed Maguire.

It was certainly an easier message to understand than Sony's posturing and pretentious ad campaign, featuring a disparate crowd of outsiders inhabiting a derelict hotel. It was also more meaningful, as well as a more spectacular, gesture than the pointed spoilers directed at Sony by Microsoft PR. A four-page advertisement in that day's edition of The Sun demonstrated its financial will, but the chairs at the Virgin launch emblazoned with the legend "Shouldn't have kept you waiting" were a distinctly cheap dig. In Paris, Microsoft sailed a barge down the Seine, past waiting PS3 fans, hung with banners that read "Xbox 360 loves





Sega entertained cold shoppers at Game's 7am Oxford Street launch with a soggy Sonic and some posing booth babes, but those opting for nearby HMV got the better deal: free copies of *Virtua Tennis 3*









Fans wait at Virgin, still unaware of how lucky they are. Word was, Sony had been ready to give TVs away to many more than the 125 who turned up on the night

you". Neither succeeded in drawing much attention beyond amused blog posts.

The free TVs were of course the greatest privilege granted to those who'd taken the trouble to witness PlayStation 3's eventual arrival in the UK. But they were not the only privilege; nor could they be the only reason the atmosphere was so charged when the countdown ended and 17-year-old Ritatsu Thomas stepped up to be the UK's first PAL PS3 owner. This final first, in this final territory, was both ending and beginning: a merciful end to a protracted, turbulent and controversial build-up that has been divisive and damaging for Sony, the industry and the gaming community at large; and the beginning for a machine that, after Harrison's unveilings of Home and *LittleBigPlanet* weeks earlier at GDC, is only just starting to show its true character. PS3, however it evolves, is finally, wholly real. It was quite a moment to witness.

"The best thing was getting my own machine last night from staff sales, plugging it in and switching it on in my own home," said Maguire. "I know what that frustration is like, to have had to wait for it. But now that's all behind us," he finished firmly. We share his hope, if not quite his confidence.

OUT THERE



ZAK NOT BACK YET?



Proof that you don't have to be a legitimate developer to see your titles slip, the creators of the unofficial *Zak McKracken 2* have announced that fans will have to wait until autumn 2007 for the first episode of *Zak McKracken And The Alien Rockstars*. Commenting on the delay from the official unofficial *Zak Mckracken 2* website, project lead Torsten Schops explained that: "There have happened many bad things to this project," but things were starting to look up. Formed over five years ago to create a sequel to the 1988 LucasArts original, the group has so far only managed to release the occasional screenshot. The team is expanding at the moment, however, and Schops would like to hear from anyone "capable of writing funny hilarious stuff in German".

- www.zak2project.net





HARDWARE

Commodore comes home

Commodore Gaming plans to enter the gaming PC market – but is it another impossible mission?

Those looking for gaming's most fully realised take on Greek tragedy may choose to turn to Commodore Computers rather than *God Of War*. Once a true giant, the electronics legend's last days were marred by infighting, mismanagement and dwindling funds.

Now, Commodore is back – or at least the brand is. Announced at March's CeBIT trade fair in Germany, that familiar logo is gracing a new family of four gaming-specific high-end PCs. From the entry-level Cg to the quad-core-powered Cxx, all machines come with Vista and therefore DX10.

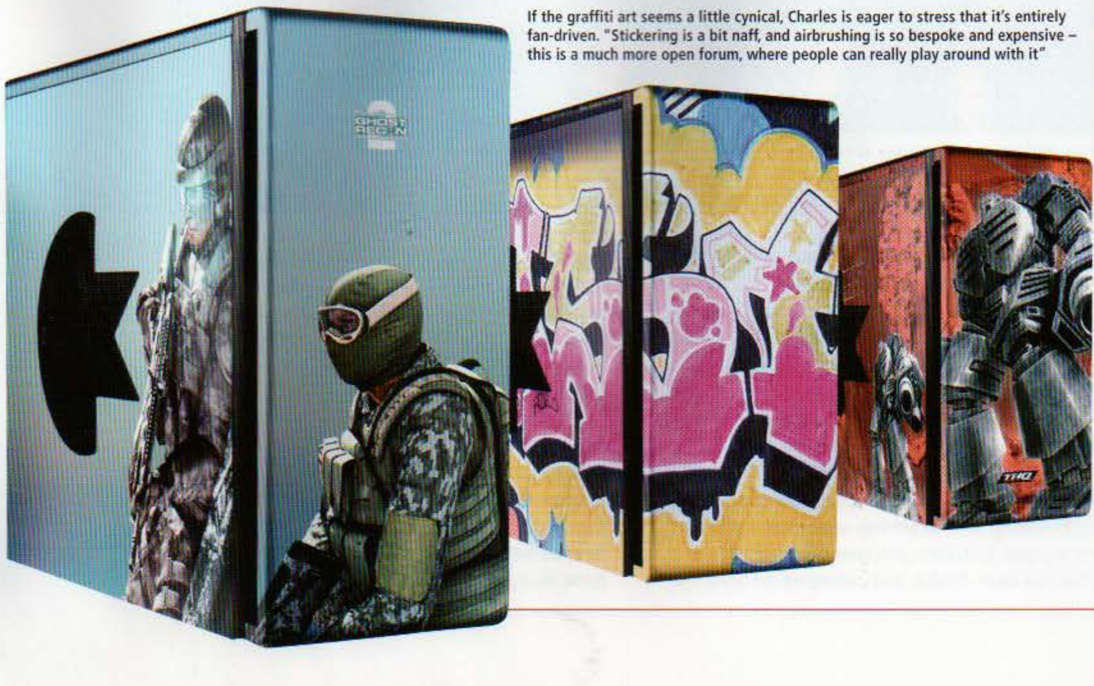
"The common factor with these machines is they're all made with gaming in mind, so they're all tuned and tweaked to run games in the best way possible..."

"There's a lot of scepticism in what we're doing," admits **Sean Charles**, Commodore Gaming's sales and marketing manager (pictured left). "You always have that when you're dealing with a brand to which people have huge emotional ties. But when you see what we've done, and the amount of input that the fans have had, and also what's inside, you can tell that this is driven by fans, for fans."

Amsterdam-based Commodore Gaming is a small team of less than ten people, and their willingness to gamble on aging brand loyalty may seem unwise, but they're also focusing on what lies beyond their famous name. "The common factor with these machines is they're all made with gaming in mind, so they're all tuned and tweaked to run games in the best way possible, which is something that can't always be said," explains Charles. "We want people to have the most sublime gaming experience and rest assured that what they're bringing home is going to be the business. We want to bring in an audience that has been afraid to venture into the confusing world of the gaming PC, or would have left with something a lot more basic and not as tuned for gaming."

Aside from an attempt to clarify the baffling world of high-spec components, the second part of Commodore's new strategy lies with the look of the machines themselves. Using a patented heat-painting process, the Commodore PCs come with interchangeable skins, featuring videogame artwork and – more controversially – graffiti designs. The company is also aiming to allow people to submit their own designs. "We started to speaking to a lot of fans who said: 'I'd like to make something for this,'" says Charles. "Trademark

If the graffiti art seems a little cynical, Charles is eager to stress that it's entirely fan-driven. "Stickering is a bit naff, and airbrushing is so bespoke and expensive – this is a much more open forum, where people can really play around with it"



Newswire

Google™

Google in your games

As predicted in E167, Google has taken its first steps into in-game advertising after a spate of recent acquisitions. The purchase of San Francisco's Adscape Media, a company providing in-game advertising aimed at full integration into the storyline of a game, was made for an undisclosed sum, and announced on Friday March 16. The same day, the search giant made public its purchase of Trendalyzer, Swedish-developed software that generates graphical ways of displaying facts, figures and statistics. These companies are in addition to automated radio advertising systems provider dMarc Broadcasting, which Google bought last year.

Speaking to the Wall Street Journal about the purchase, a Google spokesman said: "We are always considering new ways to extend Google's advertising program to benefit our users, advertisers and publishers. In-game advertising offers one such possible extension."



In terms of benchmark power, will the new Commodore machines be able to run a bleeding-edge PC title, such as *Crysis*? "I'm confident it will run on a machine," says Charles, before adding, "Which machine, whether it's the entry-level Cg, or whether it's only perfect on the Cxx I don't know, because I don't have the code. The minute we get that, we'll make it very clear which ones will run great with it"



infringement issues mean we can't just let anybody upload their own images, but we decided to let anybody make artwork, send it to us, and if it's cool we'll put it on."

Commodore is also taking into account the risk that the flighty PC audience may be unwilling to buy such standardised machines. "Of course, there will be the opportunity to upgrade parts, and we're looking into the possibility of people buying new components and sending back old components to receive discounts," explains Charles. "It's not in place at the moment, but we understand it's a worry for people that they're buying this and they want it to be future-proof. I sat down yesterday with Nvidia, and we talked about all the cards that are planned. We're aware of that before the market is."

Such issues aside, the gamer focus suggests that Commodore Gaming may have more success with the brand than other companies have with products such as the E-Vic MP3 player, and forays into web portals. The failure of the latter, the brainchild of Tulip Computers, who sold the brand on in 2005 for an estimated €22 million (£15 million), is a warning to those who think that the vogue for retro items will make any product successful.

The new machines will come with two-year warranties, and Commodore is focusing on making sure consumers feel safe buying expensive (and potentially temperamental) products from such a small outfit. "We're a small company with a lot of strong contacts that work closely with us. We're choosing service partners who we feel can give our user community the greatest support that they deserve. It's the same way we chose the components: we'll look around and say: 'Is this what I would use?'"

And as for competition, Commodore feels there's space for it in the market. "I don't really see people in terms of being competitors. Voodoo have done a lot of great stuff, even though it can be very pricey. Alienware are doing cool things, though they've moved towards broadening their market since they signed with Dell. Of course, anybody who makes a high-end gaming PC is going to be competition with us, but I think there's enough room in the market that we can stand there and make some noise."

Prices and retailers have yet to be announced, but the online shop opens mid-April and the machines should become available in May. There's no doubting that this incarnation of Commodore is taking a dangerous gamble, but it's one that's strangely in keeping with the original company, which always sailed close to the wind – often to great success. It may have run aground in the end, but not before it had racked up some real achievements.





While, name aside, there's no direct link to Jack Tramiel's original company, those who've read On The Edge, Brian Bagnall's history of Commodore Computers, may not feel that's such a loss



FLUFFY AND SHINY



Cabel Maxfield Sasser, the man responsible for last year's Buggy Saint's Row: The Musical, is continuing his role as the gaming community's online fairy godmother with the release of a second series of eminently desirable *Katamari Damacy* T-shirts. Produced in co-operation with the games' creator, Keita Takahashi, the shirts are available alongside the original run of designs. In a move that would make the King Himself proud, they also boast a variety of textures, ranging from a fuzzy Prince (left) to a shiny fairytale castle.

This time round, Sasser has bullied Takahashi into agreeing to some rather more straight-forward images of the Prince and, better still, they're now available for shipping to the UK. The shirts can be purchased through the Panic website and each come with an explanatory message from their creator.

www.panic.com







SOFTWARE

Two becomes many

What happens when an RPG becomes an MMO overnight?





It's getiting rarer and rarer for the games industry to produce truly jaw-dropping announcements, but when the maker of RPG *Two Worlds* blithely announced that it was converting the game into an MMO, and that a month or two's delay might ensue, it was greeted with deafeningly silent astonishment from game fans. It seemed to represent the single most over-ambitious instance of feature-creep ever recorded in the industry, and raised a raft of obvious questions. But ready to answer those questions was **Alexandra Constandache** (left) the CEO of Zuxxez Entertainment AG, which bankrolled development and oversaw design of the game, still in production at Reality Pump.

How early on did you start to consider making *Two Worlds* an MMO?

We planned the multiplayer part from the first design scratch of our artists. But perhaps it's necessary to define the term MMO a little bit better, or we'll soon get into problems. What is a massively multiplayer online game? Is it like *World Of WarCraft*, is it like *Guild Wars*? Right now quite a lot of other games are sold that call themselves MMOs, but it is very difficult to give a proper description for this genre because of the different usage of the term. Therefore, we simply spoke of a multiplayer part for *Two Worlds* for most of the game's development. But now that we're coming nearer to the release date, it's important that the people know we're not just presenting a small multiplayer function but a whole independent game, with hundreds of possible gamers taking part, namely a MMO. And as long as you do not define that an MMO requires monthly subscription fees, this applies from right at the beginning of the game's development.

What are the main changes needed to the game's mechanics to accommodate this large number of players? Have you had to change the scale of locations, or re-balance the availability of items or the economy?

As I said before, we planned for an extensive MMO section from the beginning of development, and therefore we needn't make any changes to the mechanics. The game was originally designed for a huge number of players – Reality Pump was drawing on its experience with the multiplayer modes of the *Earth* [*2140*, *2150* and *2160*] series. They created a lot of unique tools for *Two Worlds* which make it easy to adapt the MMO features. The item and economy system is the same as in the singleplayer mode. This game is implemented through a special quest system, which will take care of the number and development of the participants, and we have added some more regions of Antaloor for the multiplayer.

How big is the technical challenge? Was the game built from the ground-up with mass-server support in mind, or do you have to adapt now?

Once again, we planned the support for hundreds of players from the beginning. So we have nothing to adapt this close to the release. Of course it is a big technical challenge to host such a large number





Two worlds sees factions battling over the tomb of a war god in one world, while more sinister and unknown forces with a secret agenda gather their powers in another. A scrap seems inevitable





of players at one time, but this is more a problem of the server software than of the game itself. But we had enough time to think about the problems and solved them in a convenient way.

Does the change to an MMO change the financial prospects of the game? Are you considering subscription fees or virtual asset purchase?

"If there is an ultimate achievement in RPG genre, it is the thrilling characters, non-trivial plot and ability to resolve the game in a way you would never dare to do in real life"

We don't want to take extra money for the MMO part, but we do want to present the players with the best possible gaming experience. Therefore we won't charge monthly fees. Of course the online part offers quite a lot interesting business models, like virtual assets, and we definitely will use these features; some will be free and some will cost something. But they are not the most important part of our decision. The real motivation was the attractive combination of an offline and online mode for a huge RPG universe.

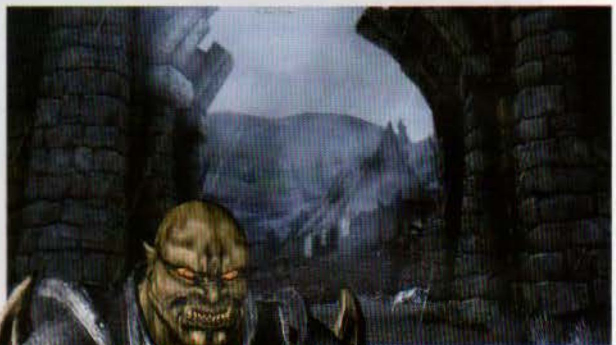
***Two Worlds* has been criticised for being very similar in some respects to *Oblivion*. What's your response to that?**

These critics are just basing their comments on some screenshots and feature lists. I doubt that these people will tell you the same after playing *Two Worlds* for a while. *Two Worlds* is a full-fledged modern role-playing game. It means it is still a RPG, with all the hallmarks of the genre, but all the features are fleshed out in a modern style, with respect to the newest developments in game mechanics, interface, openness, storytelling and creating immersion. The biggest focus of the team has been to augment the accessibility of what is a rather complex genre for the players who may not want to wade through unfriendly interface and mundane tasks before they find where the fun is.

If there is an ultimate achievement in RPG genre, it is the rich combination of thrilling characters, non-trivial plot and ability to resolve the game in a way that you feel comfortable with – or, alternatively, the way you would never dare to do in real life, but you would love to try once in a lifetime. We, and Reality Pump, hope to push the genre at least a small step towards this achievement, combining plot, freedom and interesting characters together in one piece of software.

The MMO market is becoming increasingly crowded. What can *Two Worlds* offer that other MMOs can't?

A singleplayer mode! For other genres it is quite common to experience the game in singleplayer campaigns and afterwards share this experience with friends online. But for epic RPGs, what *Two Worlds* offers is unique.





SOUND BYTES

"NG. Next Generation, taking over from the V-Ex. Out early next year. Kicks kitty-litter sand in the face of the PS2 and the X-box [sic] 360. Better faster processor than top-of-the-line PCs. Processors plural, I should say - it's got three, plus the best dedicated graphics card on the market. Eighty gig hard drive minimum, HD ready. Built-in broadband."
Iain Banks' fictional console from The Steep Approach To Garbadale has already lost out to PS3 and 360.

"My dog could take his dog any day"
Molyneux on Miyamoto at GDC.

"Anyone who's a parent and who has half a brain feels a degree of residual guilt at having games consoles in the house: we all moan about how unhealthy they are, how they make the children pale, pasty and monosyllabic (weirdly bad-tempered, too), how the games are usually inappropriate since most of them involve more sex and ultra-violence than many of us are comfortable with."
India Knight 'fesses up at Times Online

"We were joking to ourselves about tomorrow morning, when they wake up with a hangover, they're going to wonder where that camera is," he said. "This is one of those Darwin-style kind of awards, where people leave the self-incriminating evidence behind at the scene."
Richard Garriott tells KVUE.com about a digital camera left at his house after a break-in by dimwitted burglers.

MEDIA

Channel crossing

Licensing TV shows to games is nothing new, but The History Channel is licensing its whole identity



US cable TV stalwart The History Channel recently announced it was working with UK developer Slitherine, a historical strategy specialist, and niche distributor Black Bean on *The History Channel: Great Battles Of Rome*. The PC, PSP and PS2 strategy game will be the first History Channel game released internationally, and the first to use video clips from its programmes. But the network has already licensed six PC titles and one console game in the US – *The Alamo, Civil War: A Nation Divided, Crusades, Battle Of Britain* and others – over the last four years, selling upwards of a quarter of a million copies of each. Licensing director **Carrie Trimmer** explains why the channel regards a move into gaming as essential for the survival of TV brands.

"The older generation needs to start to accept that children are going to watch videogames. If there's a possibility to use their own media to reach them that has really positive results"

Why did the History Channel choose to make the move into games?
I think it's a natural fit for us based on the types of programmes that we have on the network; a lot of military programmes, for example. And it seems to be a good fit for the types of games people are interested in playing. A nice offshoot is that it brings in younger viewers to the channel, so it broadens our viewer-base.

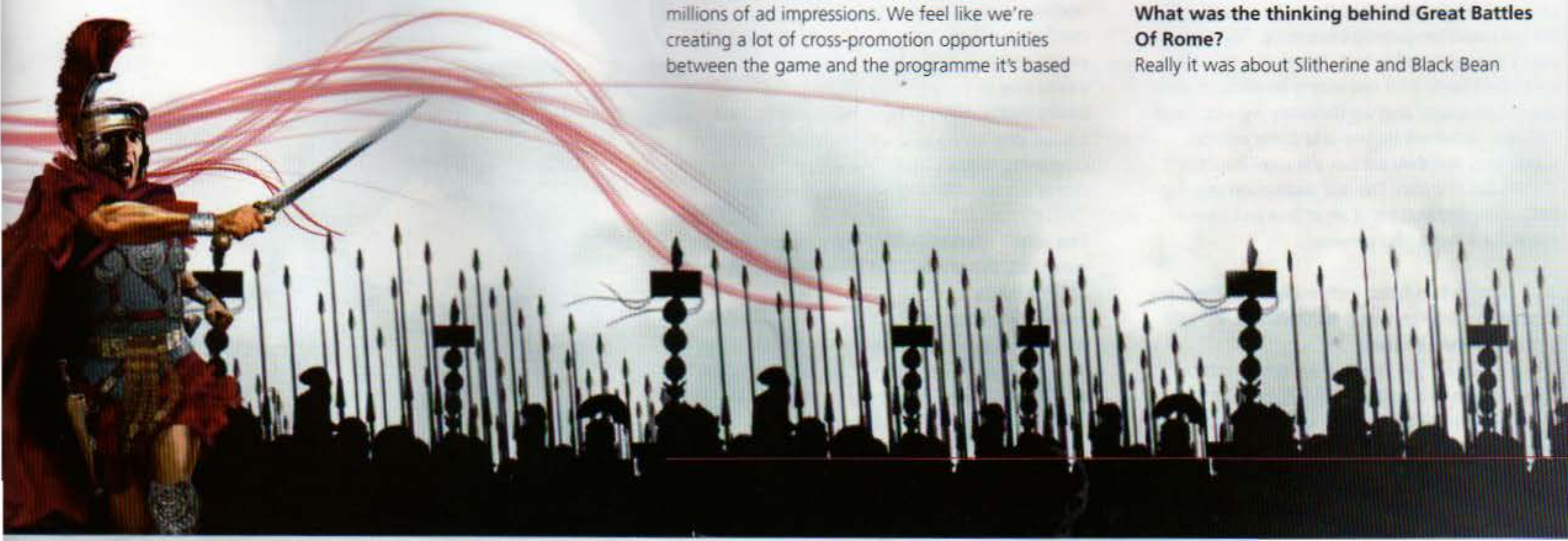
We've also done a multiplayer online game recently, and the stats from that are pretty dramatic, over a half a million unique players and millions of ad impressions. We feel like we're creating a lot of cross-promotion opportunities between the game and the programme it's based



on, called Shootout. It features recreation along with actual footage of famous battles – we call them shootouts in the States, it comes from the Old West. We chose three different episodes to adapt – the Tet Offensive, Iwo Jima and the Battle of the Bulge.

Do you see genuine convergence between TV and videogames, or is this purely an exercise in branding?
I think we're moving into the convergence phase. We see the ability of games to create an experiential aspect of the programme: somebody can watch, learn a lot about the event, potentially learn something that can help them play better, and then by playing the game can learn something they wouldn't have otherwise about that time. And on the programming side, we're using a lot more high-tech input – shooting in HD, using CGI – which are all very helpful in games. There's a lot of crossover of technology.

What was the thinking behind Great Battles Of Rome?
Really it was about Slitherine and Black Bean







PSP photography: **Nick Wilson**



proposing the concept to us, and once we saw what they were interested in doing, we were really excited to see this melding of the game content with footage clips from our programmes. We felt this was the next evolution of our gaming activity.

How involved was the channel in production?
We are pretty heavily involved, approving things along the way much as you would a TV production, certainly how our brands are used, commenting on how the action looks and so on. It's a very similar level of involvement.

Will you use the game in any programming?
Not sure, since we're not done with the game yet. But that's certainly something we would consider. We did use some footage from a non-branded game, *Rome: Total War*, in a show called Decisive Battles. [As did BBC show Time Commanders.]

Can you see yourselves exploring areas beyond military strategy in the future?
Most of the games are strategy, but the *Shootout* game is the first time we've done a firstperson shooter. Strategy does have the closest link to programming. I think there's more of a place for the history to be included, although even in *Shootout* there were a lot of sidebars that really created the history for you. It's also a bit about us being an adult network, that's what fascinates people about our programmes – what are the events that really impacted world history? – and strategy is a big part of that.



Players can customise their armies, which consist of troop-types such as legionaries, archers, cavalry and war elephants

Can there be educational benefits to these historical videogames?
It's interesting, there was a lot of discussion with the panel [held in Rome with the mayor of the city and the Italian education minister, at an event to promote *Great Battles Of Rome*] about the fact that the older generation needs to start to accept that children are going to watch videogames. If there's a possibility to use their own media to reach them then that has really positive results, and that's something that we would look forward to. We've seen an acceptance of video in the classroom for many years now, and we've launched a number of video products for the US education curriculum, so I think it's a natural next step. If there are games that can explain history in a fun way that reaches children, then I think that's positive.

With young people spending less time watching TV and more time playing games, will other TV channels follow your lead?
We've really tried to co-ordinate the two with *Shootout*, where we're cross-promoting them to ensure people aren't leaving the show to play the game. But the overall point is that media are converging, and we have to mean something to people, whatever their medium of choice is. The brands that manage that are the brands and the networks that are going to make it through this very substantial shift.



Great Battles Of Rome **offers over 100 key moments of conflict, including the Punic and Samnite wars, and Caesar's invasion of Britain**



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

While PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade begin to show interest in the indie game scene, Nintendo's Virtual Console remains focused solely on offering its back catalogue of classic titles. For this very reason, a group of intrepid Flash developers have taken matters into their own hands with the charming Wiicade.com. An idea so overwhelmingly simple it's impossible not to love or imagine under the Nintendo umbrella – over 100 free Flash-based games specifically designed for use within the Wii's web browser, coupled with the facility for users to contribute to the collection themselves, making Flash the cheapest and easiest form of developing for the Wii. An all-new form of distribution (and audience) for Flash developers everywhere, Wiicade is a breath of fresh air, and an essential click for Wii owners.

Site:
Wiicade
URL:
www.wiicade.com



SOFTWARE

Nintendo and Sega play nice

Mario and Sonic to meet for the first time at the Olympics





Miyamoto (right, with Oguchi, left) anthropomorphises Mario and Sonic, saying: "For a long time they have been discussing the possibility of one day competing against each other". When and where these conversations took place is anyone's guess



Seeing two avowed rivals on the same game artwork is quite disconcerting – comparable perhaps to an advert for both Pepsi and Coke



Which side were you on? 1991 was a memorable year for a number of reasons, not least of which being the fall of the Soviet Union and the apparent triumph of democracy. But just as one conflict ended another would begin, only this time the enemies were scrapping it out for precious space in your bedroom. Sixteen years ago, Sega's unveiling of Sonic drew a very long line in the corporate sand, effectively forcing gamers to make a choice between the fast newness of the blue mammal and the safe nostalgia of Nintendo's Italian plumber. Even the lucky few owning both Mega Drive and SNES were deeply entrenched – everyone had their favourite, and those claiming to have no preference at all were surely either diplomats or liars.

An event on March 28 effectively ended this competitive feud when Sega and Nintendo jointly announced *Mario And Sonic At The Olympic Games*, to be released in the autumn for both the DS and Wii. A press release proclaimed a 'historical announcement' in which 'two of the biggest icons in the entertainment industry, Mario and Sonic, are joining forces'. However hyperbolic, this was enough to set the mainstream press alight, inspiring reams of column inches in many news publications usually scathingly sceptical about the worth of videogame culture.

The game will be developed in partnership with International Sports Media, which has an exclusive licence with the International Olympic Committee. Despite being due for release in late 2007, it is officially endorsed by the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Only three events have been revealed so far: 100m sprint, swimming and table tennis.

Both companies promoted the game by bringing out their big guns in the shape of Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto and Sega's **Hisao Oguchi**. "For the first time," said Oguchi, "two of the world's greatest games characters come together to compete in the world's greatest sporting event and we couldn't be more excited." For Nintendo's part, a spokesman said Miyamoto's "involvement is way more than for a lot of normal Nintendo games".

It's been rumoured for some time now that *Super Smash Bros Brawl* producer Masahiro Sakurai has been sourcing Sonic for his Wii game, fuelling speculation that the current deal may have been an IP trade off. If so, Sega will benefit from publishing Mario in *At The Olympic Games* outside of Japan, whilst Nintendo will have landed Sonic for Sakurai's singular *Smash Bros* vision.

In this climate of mutual euphoria it may seem as though the agreement is entirely equitable. In truth, it's difficult to see it as anything other than a complete coup for Nintendo, whose hardware now facilitates Sonic's best chance of a credible revival. In view of the lacklustre reception of recent *Sonic* offerings, Sega might do well to recognise that it's been a long time since the gaming world waited with bated breath for any new standalone game he might be starring in. Until that's fixed, Mario, it seems, will always come in first.





Hedgehogs and plumbers are not usually seen in the often bland Olympics titles, so a dash of character must be a good thing



The Xbox 360 Elite inherits the 360 premium pack's silver drive tray, but the widely rumoured move to 65nm, cooler-running chips has not been confirmed. A touchscreen PSP2 mock-up (below)

HARDWARE

New look for old consoles

But Sony and Microsoft offer more than just cosmetic improvements

Rumours of new hardware – some more plausible than others – have been running wild lately, but Microsoft added a little solidity to them at the end of March by announcing the black Xbox 360 Elite.

Sporting a 120gb hard drive and an HDMI port, the console will go on sale in the US at the end of April for $480 (£244) with no UK availability announced. The usual 360 accessories and controllers will also be available in black. The extra storage capacity will come as good news to fans of Xbox Live Arcade, after last month's tripling of the size limit for downloadable titles from 50 to 150mb. A 512mb memory unit has also been released for those without hard drives.

Things seem less concrete in the Sony camp, however, with Sony confirming a PSP refresh but little more. SCE UK's managing director Ray Maguire, speaking at the launch of Sony's PSP in Education initiative, said that the current model was simply the 'first iteration' of the device but that, whatever happened, the PSP's screen shape and size was fixed.

Most sources agree that a new unit would be slimmer and lighter, with anything from 4gb to 160gb of storage and possibly even a slot-loading UMD drive and built-in camera. A brighter screen and faster load times are also being spoken of, as is, from the further corners of leftfield, a touchscreen. As often happens, bored graphic designers have produced mock-ups of what the new PSP might look like (above), freely available on the internet, with unergonomic shapes and dual analogue sticks prevailing.

Sony has, however, issued a statement saying that there are no immediate changes planned for the PSP other than firmware updates.

Continue

GDC
Still the friendliest, most optimistic event each year

Voting
Spinach *is* delicious, dogs *are* better than cats

Meat
A giant steak is how you know humans are winning

Quit

Queueing
It's fine. We didn't want any 46in Bravias anyway

Borrowing
Ever wished your parents would get their own Wii?

Flying in Japan
Now that DSes and PSPs have been banned

Author: Arkday and Boris Strugatsky
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07978 6



ROADSIDE PICNIC

The original source material for THQ's Stalker gets a welcome re-release

It seems unlikely, but maybe book publishers do keep track of games. At least, that's one possible reason for the current publication of Arkday and Boris Strugatsky's 1977 classic novel Roadside Picnic in Gollancz's ongoing Sci-Fi Masterworks series the same month THQ finally gets around to releasing its anticipated shooter *Stalker* [see page 84]. The missing link between the two of course is Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 cult film Stalker, on which Ukrainian developer GSC Game World based the game, which is itself based upon the Strugatskys' book. Technically though, the term 'stalker' is pretty much all that unites the three. A group of those outsiders who risk their lives for cash to find alien objects within a Zone visited by a mysterious alien lifeforce, they are the ultimate freelancers; their life expectancy low and their trade illegal and controlled through the vagaries of black market economics. Even those who survive suffer the long term stigma of birth abnormalities. But of all three of these examples of eastern European art forms, there's little question that Roadside Picnic is the purest. Following set points in the life of stalker Red Schuhart, it paints a brutal picture of how life can be traded and the compromises that come to haunt those who risk everything on market forces. The glory, however, is its transcendental ending; something also picked up in the stark beauty of Tarkovsky's film. The question is if *Stalker* (reviewed on p84) disrupts that flow.

Author: Oliver James
Publisher: Vermillion
ISBN: 978 0 09 190010 6



AFFLUENZA

The road to becoming successful and sane starts with being authentic and playful, reckons a psychologist

Starting any book with a ten-question test including queries such as 'Recently have you felt pathetic, incompetent or useless?' and 'Have you cursed yourself for being stupid, fat or lazy?' hardly seems the best way to go about overcoming what Oliver James calls 'the contagious middle class virus causing depression, anxiety, addiction and ennui'. Codenamed Affluenza, James blames this confusion of what we really need with the wants consumer society tells us we need for statistics such as the quarter of Americans who say they have suffered from emotional distress during the past year. Combined with anecdotal evidence from interviews James has carried out in locations from Russia to China, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, his conclusion is that western civilisation is in a bad way. The biggest trigger, he suggests, is the confusion between having somewhere to live and treating property as an investment. Could mortgages be the root of all evil? Yes, if they require both parents to work, which in turn means their children have a disrupted relationship, he reckons. And as a child psychologist, James unsurprisingly argues that the first 36 months of life are the most important in terms of future mental wellbeing. Of course, some will find this solution simplistic, others impracticable, and what we're supposed to make of the vitriolic last chapter's attack on New Labour and Tony Blair is anyone's guess, but the book certainly points out weighty issues, as well as some interesting solutions.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

HEI$T

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS



The Interplay vets at inXile unveil their plot to rob *Driver* of its limelight, citing classic car chase movies – of all the things – as their inspiration. The San Francisco of summer 1969 is the venue

Grand Theft Auto IV

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TAKE-TWO



A whisker too late to make this month's issue, the first reveal of the real sequel to the ground-breaking *GTA III* will, one way or another, turn the world (or at least the sandbox) upside down

Warhawk

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



It looks like rumours of online-only distribution won't be settled until the game is either in your hands or on your hard drive. The dedication to online co-op and competition, however, is clear

Devil May Cry 4

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



The PC version is the greater surprise in Capcom's multiformat announcement, a quality PC version being the stuff of dreams following recent botches of *Resident Evil 4* and *Devil May Cry 3*

Lego Batman

FORMAT: VARIOUS **PUBLISHER:** WARNER BROS



It's taken a while for confirmation to surface after series director Jonathan Smith toured E3 2006 with a box of Batman Lego and an enigmatic grin, but it's always seemed a safe and tempting bet

Beaterator

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** ROCKSTAR



Rockstar's browser-based music sequencer of 2005 flees the net with a little help from producer extraordinaire Timbaland, who'll be providing much of the aural arsenal. Rockstar Leeds develops

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

FORMAT: PC, PS2, PSP **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS



And another unexpected PC game; will the lack of a 360 version deprive it of *Legend*'s 'next generation' textures? Peru, Greece and Egypt stages are among those plundered from the vaults

FlatOut Ultimate Carnage

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** EMPIRE



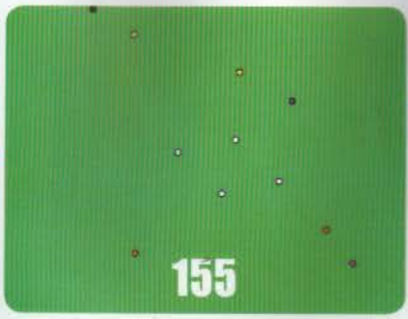
Bugbear updates the reliable *FlatOut 2* for the 360 club, claiming a newer experience than you might think. The visual horsepower is evident, while online races now have space for 12 players

Ace Combat 6: Fires Of Liberation

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



No announcement yet of a PS3 version and, unlike *Ridge Racer 6*, no simple excuse. Dynamic objective paths during missions and advanced squadron command join (at last) online functionality



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Formation

www.briancable.com/view.php?id=28

A fresh take on the popular 'bullet hell' genre, *Formation*'s twist is that you have to control not one, but a series of independently moving objects, suffering random changes in direction, without losing any of them to the endless rain of falling dots. Flashing dots can be clicked on to reset the level and offer a temporary respite, but they will also then increase your formation by one, making survival even more difficult. A click of the mouse button shrinks your formation to make it easier to steer, but also sends your score into reverse.

It may sound complex, but after a couple of random deaths everything snaps into place, and controlling your formation becomes hectic, intuitive fun. The work of Chicago-based Brian Cable, best known for his 2004 strategy game *Proximity*, and who intriguingly bills himself as both game designer and novelist, *Formation* lacks graphical polish but has a clarity of purpose that other, prettier, games could learn a lot from. While it may not keep you busy for hours, it's an excellent way to needlessly stress yourself out.







Shots of Home released so far show well-dressed young adults having inane conversations, something quite unlike other online worlds or social networking sites

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Who's home?

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on PS3's online hub



Home has just been unveiled for the PS3. It won't arrive before autumn, but can it succeed in Japan? Since it has not been announced officially here yet, only a very small number of core users know about it. But it is obvious that Home has the potential to greatly expand the PS3's online community, and it has to be said that these 3D avatars will benefit from the power of the PS3 in terms of graphics. But at the same time, Home seems to be a very western thing that, with its very realistic 3D avatars and their design, may not have much of an appeal for Japanese users. To make it a success in Japan, changes may be required with, for example, more anime-oriented avatars. So here is my take on Home from a Japanese perspective.

Recently, some of the Japanese media has been talking about *Second Life*'s apparent success in the west. This hasn't just been from the specialist videogame or technology media but in the mass media too. I can see two reasons for this: first, *Second Life* is an overseas phenomenon which is being reported in Japan as news. Secondly, it has not been localised yet. Home for the PS3 has often been shown as being post-*Second Life*. This is a comparison I find in general around me (and one not necessarily limited to Japan). While *Second Life*'s potential is still untested and uncertain in this country, Home's chance of success in Japan, or even if it will be the much-needed killer app, is an even greater unknown. Visually, Home has impact – that can't be contested – but I don't feel that it is a decisive reason for people to buy a PS3.

The Japanese are used to receiving a complete and high quality service from everything. You find this in things like restaurants or hotels, but in a certain sense you could say the same for gaming's content and controls. Games consoles starting with the Famicom have had to be accessible to many and provide a very user-friendly experience. We could probably trace the roots of console gaming in Japan back to this high level of expectation in services people have here. When it comes to MMORPGs, users here are very uneasy about player killing and having to trade in real money. But they particularly dislike the real money concept, especially when it becomes a full-time occupation (or a job in that sense).

"Home is like a 3D translation of Xbox Live. I think we can say that it will mark the true start of a new competition between gaming platforms to see which console can build up the biggest and strongest online community"

Maybe it is because of some heritage from the so-called bushido code, but people are not very fond of dishonesty and unfairness in games. In that sense, it may look as if *Second Life* could not sit well with a Japanese point of view. Its controls are not console based, its concept is quite uncommon (meaning it's difficult to understand) it allows





A wealth of character customisation options is being shown, although whether these will be free or micropaymented is yet to be revealed

















almost anything and uses real money to a degree. In fact, if they had to choose, many Japanese people may actually prefer Home.

Maybe, in the west, users could feel disappointed at the lack of a certain adult touch or the ability to spend real money in Home, especially compared to *Second Life*. In Japan, the problem may be different as I pointed out earlier. The character design is essential and, in that regard, Home may not look so appealing.

It is true that it feels like *Second Life* but, in a very extreme sense, I would say that Home is more like a 3D translation of Xbox Live. I think we can say that it will mark the true start of a new competition between gaming platforms to see which console can build up the biggest and strongest online community.

Home has its issues, but I personally really feel excited about it. I like the idea of an online community gathering in an environment powered by the PS3's high performance graphics and processing. The potential of Home looks almost limitless to me.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

LittleBigPlanet



The GDC presentation may have been familiar content, but the enthusiastic response gave a hint to just how creative and happy a community it could foster
PS3, SCEE

Halo 3



Thanks to assumptions of Bungie's brilliance, it's easy to be blasé about this. But, tickling at the edge of your brain, is the idea it might just be really, really, really great
360, MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS

LocoRoco 2



Hinted at as a PS3 title at its creator's GDC session, there's no doubt that a sequel to the PSP original (above) could be a beautiful validation of Sixaxis
TBA, SCEI

Don't fence MMOs in

Think you don't like them? Think again



World Of WarCraft has become the accepted template, but MMOs are much more varied

Alexandre Constandache, answering (on p20) concerns about the sudden MMO-ification of Reality Pump's PC/360 RPG *Two Worlds*, points out with understandable frustration: "It's necessary to define the term MMO a little bit better, or we'll soon get into problems... Is it like *World Of WarCraft*? Is it like *Guild Wars*?... It is very difficult to give a proper description for this genre because of the different usage of the term."

It's a fair point. Had she been reading this month's Hype section, she might have said: 'Is it like *Phantasy Star Universe*? Is it like *Wakfu*? Is it like *Pirates Of The Burning Sea*? Is it like *Monster Hunter Frontier*?' The more you look, the more the MMO fragments. Just what is the defining characteristic? It only takes one player watching you grind in *WOW* to make you keenly aware of its massively multiplayer framework, but a game with a two-player server cap would struggle to earn an MMO badge. It can't be the payment systems – free, subscription-driven and micropayment-based models flourish, as do mixtures of all three. Is it all in the balance of communal versus instanced content? If it's all about ranking your own character's progression against those of thousands of others, then why don't *Halo 2*'s ranking boards count? If it's all about shared experiences, communication and the chance to make new friends, why doesn't iSketch qualify?

It doesn't matter, of course – labels always become more useless the more they're used. Players aren't thinking in genres any more, and the sooner developers escape them, the better they'll be able to court this rapidly diversifying market. The people who flocked to Azeroth didn't do so because they wanted to play an MMO, they came because they wanted to join in the fun. Eventually, the idea of an offline game will drop away, as DLC, leaderboards, chat facilities and media streaming are included in even the most resolutely singleplayer games, turning them into online experiences. And soon, with the growth of user-created content, more prevalent co-op, better communication and shared replays, all games will be communal to a degree. Eventually, no one will call anything an MMO any more, because everything will be one.









FORMAT: **PS2, PSP, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE-TWO**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JULY**

Manhunt 2

Rockstar prepares another gift to the tabloid press as Manhunt stalks back onto the scene



How much of the pleasure in executions involves the vaguely comic murder clips rather than the simple joy of achieving the best possible result is a muddy aspect left open to question







Sequels are supposed to be the easy option. *Manhunt 2*, however, is likely to be anything but. Lost in amongst the mix of tabloid scandal, murder enquiries and retail bans that accompanied the release of Rockstar's original title was the fact that *Manhunt* was a supremely well-realised game, with solid play mechanics, genuinely edgy subject matter and a take on stealth that understood the need for adequate visual payback after all that creeping around. A demanding experience, it dared to explore a link between entertainment and violence that most other, less controversial, titles are happy to simply capitalise upon. Thought-provoking and often disturbing, *Manhunt's* distribution paid the price for its innovations. The big question for a sequel, therefore, is not how will it play, but how do the developers expect to get it released in the first place?

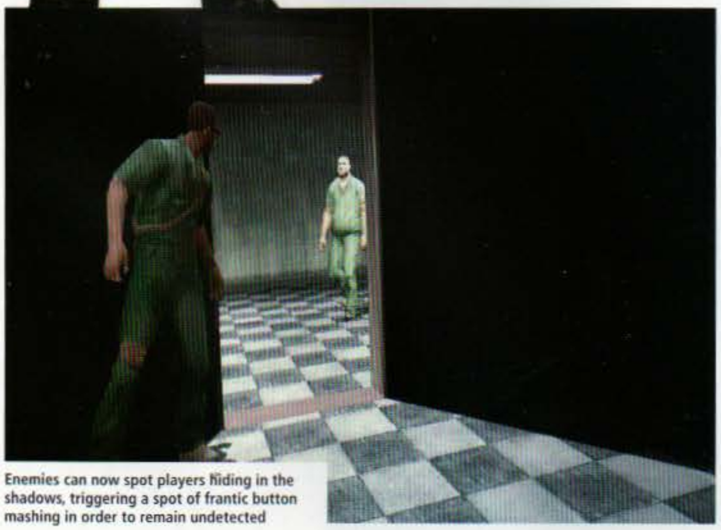
Rockstar is understandably unwilling to enter into any kind of discussion on the subject, but judging by the game itself some of the more troubling – although also more interesting – elements of the storyline have been simplified, and the result is a title which, while no less bloody, has less to say about coercion and killing for fun.

The PS2 version is all that's been revealed so far, and will be the first game released from the freshly-minted Rockstar London Studio. Bringing in paranoia and mental illness as the justification for this round of extreme splatter, the studio is eager to elaborate on the atmosphere and gameplay of the original, while distancing itself from the first game's characters and snuff film premise. With a shift in the storyline to escaped mental patients, and a sinister conspiracy that needs to be unravelled, the game has opted for a more traditional narrative, but one which may not serve the series' psychological elements as well.

Watching one of Rockstar's developers play through the opening tutorial section, however, echoes of the original show through quickly. Opening with an asylum escape during a lightning storm, the main character Danny's heavy, apelike gait calls to mind James Earl Cash from the first *Manhunt*, and most of the on-screen furniture still looks familiar and functions in the same way.

> **Some of the more troubling elements of the storyline have been simplified, and the result is a title which, while no less bloody, has less to say about coercion and killing for fun**

Skipping forward to a later level set in a brothel, Rockstar's promised elaborations become clear. There are four weapon sets this time around, ranging from one-shot kill like syringes and pens through to distance weapons like shotguns. As ever, there's horrible creativity at work with the tools at your disposal, and the game flawlessly cater to your lowest instincts. It's no surprise to discover that objects like pliers, needed to reveal secret passages, can also be used in executions, with cartoonishly squeamish



Enemies can now spot players hiding in the shadows, triggering a spot of frantic button mashing in order to remain undetected











Gaining control of the shotgun provides a welcome change of pace, as Danny's lumbering walk switches to a mad dash and the bodycount goes through the roof



Rockstar's achievements in sound design – distant rumblings and low ambient chords – continue in a game that creates atmosphere through suggestion. The asylum seems a cross between Black Mesa and the institutions of *Second Sight*

consequences – what should surprise is that you thought to try them out in the first place.

Stealth also gets a slight overhaul with the limited ability to smash lights and make your own shadows to hide in. This plays a crucial role in *Manhunt 2*'s big evolution: luring enemies towards the new environmental executions. Set-pieces in which goons are dispatched via open fuse boxes and toilet bowls, these moments are scripted but profoundly visceral.

What's remained unchanged, however, is the execution mechanic itself: a perfectly calibrated play on risk in which the intensity of the execution depends on how long the enemy has been targeted. In many ways, *Manhunt*'s take on gratuity has always been deeply perverse – rewarding those with the patience to wait the longest before acting.

The narrative also seems to be as linear as the original title's, but with room for each set-piece to play out differently given the player's actions and AI that remains unpredictable in the good sense of the word. What's yet to be seen, though, is how the game will cope with losing the Director, whose disembodied ravings were such a large part of the ambience of the original *Manhunt*. It's possible that without him, the sequel will lose much of that unique pressure cooker atmosphere and sense of claustrophobia. Although amiable psycho Leo Klasper performs a similar function, he provides less moral complication for the player to chew on, and the lack of a charged subject matter like snuff films seems to make the game's content less thematically meaningful. *Manhunt 2* will certainly make you tense – but it may not make you as uncomfortable.

The big question of how a game like this will play out on the Wii remains unanswered at this point. Although Rockstar is saying that the game will be essentially the same across all platforms, there's no real indicator yet of how the Remote and Nunchuk will feature in the version being developed by Rockstar Toronto. Environmental executions, such as strangling enemies with a phone cord, look like the obvious choices, yet, as with much of the Wii's current portfolio, *Manhunt 2* runs the risk that, not being built for the console from the ground upwards, this most intriguing of propositions may fail to live up to its potential.

Some things remain certain, however. Just as Jack Thompson is already engaged in all-out warfare with publisher Take-Two Interactive to stop the game from destroying the entire fabric of modern civilisation by appearing in the retail channels, it's clear that Rockstar is creating an experience that's solid, rewarding and often mesmerising. Its understanding of the way that games should use cinematic elements like sound design and lighting is a direct contrast to most titles' clumsy cutscenes and broken scripts, and the developer's continued refusal to focus-test material is admirable. If the results of such techniques continue to be as engaging as this, it might be time to start signing a few petitions of your own to stop some of the more challenging videogames from disappearing underground forever.



Using the toilet

Environmental executions play out a little like the puzzles in *Legend Of Zelda* games, with the player presented with various pieces – a toilet bowl, a flickering light and a distant enemy, for example – before trying to work out how they should come together. Once again, Rockstar's real achievement is in varying the pace – mixing up the stalk-and-lurk with contained chemistry-set moments. The rewards for such careful planning, as might be expected, are often elaborately graphic, and more than make up for all that time spent hiding in the shadows.



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q3 2007**







Either the latest demo build is particularly old (which is quite possible) or there's much to be done before *Skate* can visit the above environment in realtime. Downhill races are set to feature in the finished version, Balmer quick to reassure anyone concerned with how you get back up the hill once you've rumbled your way down. "There's a transit system," he says. "I've never had too much fun skating uphill"

Skate

The governor of videogame sports finally takes on the chairman of the board

That EA's last skateboarding game was a Simpsons title says it all, the *Tony Hawk* stranglehold enough to reduce even the world's biggest publisher to competing via indirect, benign parody. As **Jay Balmer**, associate producer of *Skate* points out, that reign has allowed Neversoft experiments into biking, driving and off-board exploration, creating an intimidating resource of code and experience. So how do you compete? Simple – don't.

"We have a new experience that we want to share," he begins, "and it's not about climbing ladders. It's about ollying, doing a kickflip and grinding a rail, and making that feel powerful. Really, we've ignored the fact that *Tony Hawk* even exists. But now that we're in this place, of course, showing the game and sharing it with people, Tony's come back to haunt us. That's fine: it was inevitable."

And after eight of *Tony Hawk's* projects, have run their rollercoaster of hype, praise, promises and disappointments over seven years, let's not mince words about what *Skate* has in store. As gamers themselves will discover when its demos arrive online, it's the skateboarding game that modern consoles arguably deserve. A sim rather than a combo-crazy abstraction, it deals in the essential act of taking wheels and a deck into a concrete playground and discovering just what can be done.

You push off with the face buttons, one for each foot, and grab with the triggers, one for each hand. Forward on the left analogue stick leans you on to the board, sustaining your momentum, while back on the right 'pumps' you for a jump before an upwards throw launches you into a trick, at which point *Skate* really starts scoring points

Physics, says Balmer, are its "master", governing not just the flight and grace of skater and board but every interaction between them and the surrounding world. If you land askew on a squared rail, for example, its edge cutting into the joint of just one wheel and its truck, then that's your grind, awkward as it might be. By adjusting





A sim rather than a combo-crazy abstraction, it deals in the essential act of taking wheels and a deck into a concrete playground and discovering just what can be done









Skate's physics system has the same eye for realistic landings as it does for midair tricks. A downward slope, for example, can turn a bone-breaking landing into a smooth one





your poise with one stick and your feet with the other you can then break out into a T-bone, nose-grind or another obscure improvisation. Or you can bail of course, the physics master then calculating the force with which your face meets the floor. Preconceptions of fitting ragdolls and clipping limbs needn't be applied, as hours spent within a confined test environment – a sparse skate park – suffered neither.

"We didn't really focus on hooks," Balmer points out. "We focused on making a great game – that's the hook. The camera angle's a fisheye because it highlights what the skater's doing, which is what the game's about. It's not about where they're going.

"That mechanism of everything linked together directly, where you have to manual, grind, manual and revert – it's not actually accurate. Skateboarding is a line, and that's what you watch; that's what's interesting. When you watch a skating contest people will do lines back to back, but not connected by a manual. It's about doing something huge, at which point it's exciting to see what's next. When they start repeating, that's when the line's over. The inspiration was: 'Would someone be interested in watching this if it was a video?'"

Very much a game in which the action is its own reward, *Skate* currently feels quite desolate in terms of geography and signposted challenge yet rich with incentive to simply, as Balmer puts it, "un-train" yourself from the belief that there's only one skateboarding solution. The feeling of liberation that comes with seeing a gap and wanting simply to learn how to work the board across it, perhaps with a flip to crown the achievement, can't be understated. But does Balmer predict a backlash from gamers averse to such unstructured play?

"What we're seeing now is just the toy," he assures, "as in 'here's a skateboard, please start skating.' What you're not seeing is the progression and the tutorials. We know there have to be both options. Someone has to say 'what next?' and see what's next, where it is, and how to complete it. Then there's the player who wants that organic experience, who doesn't care about the challenge or is happy to just stumble upon it. So there'll be a clear structure – no one will be lost."

Skate's uncomplicated name, we're told, isn't the result of some celebrity licensing agreement gone wrong or a statement of EA's intent to monopolise its genre, but a declaration of openness. In its online world, in which a replay is said to be as easily sent as an email (see 'Bulletin boards'), everyone has the potential to become the star. There'll be no upgrades to artificially enhance performance, and little in the way of customisation – so all that's between the best and the beginner is experience.

"I know there's stuff that's missing," Balmer admits. "If we were building the ultimate game it would come out in five years, but we don't think it's right to wait that long. The lack of certain features gives us room to grow."



Skate sees itself as a game in which showmanship isn't limited to the numbers that appear on your HUD. Holding the right stick in position once your stunt is underway zooms the camera for a close-up of your board and feet



Bulletin boards

***Skate*'s community features have been designed to address what Balmer calls the "I've done something cool but my wife doesn't care" dilemma. A tap of Y brings up replay options, stationing a cameraman next to nearby scenery to capture whatever tricks you can pull off. The in-game replay editor can then import the clip for sharing via console online services and a planned community website. EA wants it to be better promoted and supported than *Burnout Revenge*'s 360 equivalent, and all eyes will be on EA's servers in the hope of them honouring these ambitions.**

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FLYING LAB SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Pirates Of The Burning Sea

The latest MMO contender is bubbling to the surface, and after five years in development it's looking fittingly shipshape



With dozens of crew assaulting at once it's hard to imagine how Flying Lab will ensure the ensuing chaos is dramatic, and not just cramped and annoying





In a genre saturated with alien settings, *Pirates Of The Burning Sea* feels a great deal closer to home and perhaps at first glance mundane. The truth is the 17th century Caribbean setting is one of the biggest reasons why this upcoming MMO is worth watching. Instead of anxiously attempting to avoid cliché and breathe life into its own interpretation of fantasy or science fiction, Flying Lab needs to recreate the stereotypes of the era. And as for there being less varied options during character creation, who can imagine a more diverse range of peoples than the British, French, Spanish and the pirates themselves? It's an instantly interesting decision, although worries about there being an overpopulation of pirates might have to be set aside.

Not that *POTBS* is striving for anything approaching realistic. This is very much the swashbuckling, legendary interpretation of the seafarers of the era. Glowing green ghost ships can be found in the Bermuda Triangle, and we'd wager that if sea monsters don't feature in the initial release they won't take long to follow. The instanced, on-foot adventures you can expect to have on mysterious shores and uncharted islands appear similarly heroic, with your bold captain facing off against livid Mayans.

Thirdperson melee combat is something of a focus now, a curious development when two years ago Flying Lab stated it wouldn't be in the game at launch but it might be added later. It seems likely that it was brought in to make the game more accessible and give it a more rounded appeal than an apparent online naval combat simulator. The swordfights use the same familiar (and comforting) system of timed skills we've seen so many times before. Abilities are gained as your character progresses along one of the three possible paths of Fencing (traditional one handed swordsmanship), Florentine (a more aggressive dual-wielding style), and Dirty Fighting (a collection of sneaky tricks of the sort you might associate with Jack Sparrow.)

Glowing green ghost ships can be found in the Bermuda Triangle, and we'd wager that if sea monsters don't feature in the initial release they won't take long to follow

The first way this might deviate from what you're used to is visually. *POTBS* wants to break the trend of having a laughably small number of animations in MMOs, though this is perhaps more necessary than i is idealistic – the increasingly pretty fireworks most MMOs drape over your attacks would look completely out of place here. More excitingly, bring your ship alongside another with a bit of skilful navigation and you get the option to swing across and attempt to



While surveying your surroundings from the deck of your ship feels a suitably majestic thing to do, you're a prisoner there, as going below the deck of the game's 50 ships is a feature that's not being included at launch











disable it by slaughtering its captain. This is no solo endeavour – while a ship is limited to one player character any friendly ships in the battle can board with you, and you can all bring aboard crewmen in 20-strong waves to engage enemy crewmen while you hunt for the unfortunate man in charge.

While this new emphasis on a familiar combat style should prove a successful way of coaxing people into the game, sailing is still at its heart. Owning your own vessel isn't some endgame treat or reward for putting in just enough hours to get hooked. The tutorial tells the story of your rise to the position of captain, and while your first boat might not be the galleon most players will have in their mind's eye, you're still very much capable of sailing between towns, sinking other ships and engaging in a touch of marauding from the off.

Nautical warfare is touted as being more in-depth than the arcade blasting of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* but a long way from the complexity of a full-fledged sim. It's a vague comparison, but a better one proves elusive without any similar games. Foremost in players' minds will be the wind, which determines whether you're a moving target or almost completely immobile. Cannon ranges and firing arcs are indicated by shading on the water between you and your target, and eventually you'll have 12 types of shot to suit the situation and your own noble or raptorial personal objectives. To keep player shipwrights in business, but prevent irritating harshness, ships have a limited number of durability points: the more expensive the vessel, the fewer point it starts with. Lose a fight and you lose a durability point, lose all your points and the ship is destroyed – with you a sad figure on a hastily assembled raft.

A final feature is the perpetual tug of war between sides over ports. Large-scale PVP battles are promised over 80 towns, giving an advantage such as reduced taxes to the nation that holds them, and commendations to any side that manages a sweeping victory. Pirates can get involved, but can only bring about a three-day claim, reliant instead on their unique ability to steal enemy ships.

POTBS is perhaps the closest thing to a safe bet MMOs have got on the horizon. It's not exceptionally ambitious, it's had a beta running for over a year, and the self-funded position of Flying Lab means nobody has to worry about the kind of hurried release that struck down *Vanguard*. Then again, this is becoming an overpopulated genre. A lack of the reckless enterprising so evident in its world might be *POTBS*'s downfall.





Tearing through rigging with chain shot (above) has more advantages than making enemies an easier target. Slower turns make it harder for them to bring their guns to bear





Despite being governed by timings and mouse clicks, *Pirates Of The Burning Sea*'s combat feels more brutal than that of its online peers, with the MMO staples of particle effects and shimmering magical auras swapped for cold steel, hot lead and bursts of startlingly red blood

Steady as she goes

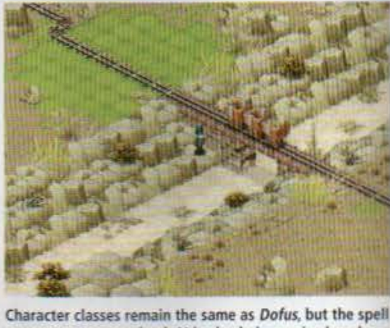
***POTBS*'s addition to the tried and tested formula of combat centring on recycling skills is your Balance meter. As long as it's full you're capable of parrying blows and staying safe, but incoming attacks will gradually reduce it. Traditionally in online games you're untouchable to foes a few levels beneath you, but here massed weak attacks can reduce your Balance and render you vulnerable at the same rate as a single more skilled opponent. The meter was born out of a desire for accurate swashbuckling, where fending off multiple opponents is often key.**











Character classes remain the same as *Dofus*, but the spell system gets an overhaul. AI is also being revised, and a political and electoral system is planned as a download

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ANKAMA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Wakfu

Can Ankama's dreamy cartoon world prove a haven for those put off by the clamorous crowds of WOW?

Wakfu's premise, an ocean world flooded by an ogre's tears, manages to be both disarmingly whimsical and faintly disgusting at the same time, and hints at creators with a keen eye for a mash-up. Those familiar with Ankama's previous title, *Dofus*, will be able to bear this out. Following in the footsteps of the earlier game, *Wakfu* keeps the quirky blend of MMO and turn-based strategy, but broadens its horizons in almost every direction.

Set 1,000 years after the events of *Dofus*, Ankama is keen to stress that this is a separate game rather than just an expansion. The turn-based combat of the original title retains the same basis, but there are refinements throughout. The most obvious difference is leveling-up. Taking a similar approach to games like *Crackdown*, characters will now evolve depending on their specific actions – for example, the more a spell is cast, the more powerful it becomes. It's a change that hopes to enable greater specialisation, yet also encouraging wider experimentation for those who want it.

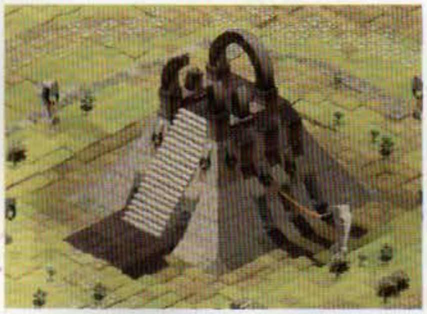
And while Ankama co-founder Anthony Roux's visuals retain the same shamelessly charming character as the previous game, this is a significantly wider world. New multi-directional scrolling has been implemented, forcing the team to move away from Flash, and the amount of players per server is also drastically increasing from roughly 5,000, to 25,000 at any one time. What effects this massive population jolt will have on the game's secret garden ambience remains to be seen, but Ankama has been learning a lot from its experience of nurturing the right kind of communities on *Dofus*, and seem confident they can handle the challenge.

Subscription-based, like *Dofus*, a trial zone will be free with the game's release later this year, with a beta test beginning in July. Ankama is hoping to raise the player base from the 200,000 paying users of *Dofus* to at least twice that, and elsewhere there are plans to create a Wakfu cartoon as well as porting the game to the DS and mobile phones. That's not to suggest the developer is forgetting its starting point: if all goes according to plan, *Wakfu* should have new content released roughly every two months. It's an ambitious strategy, and taking into account the professionalism of Ankama's previous work, it seems that beneath the cartoon tears and the bucolic dreaminess there's the hard steel of genuine resolve at work here.



Dofus UK

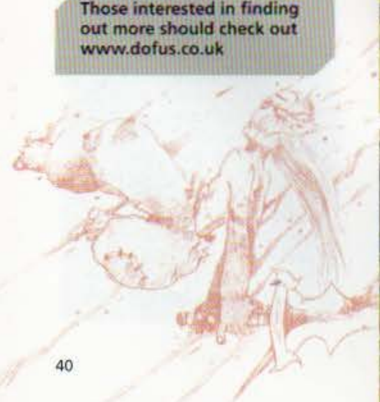
As if launching *Wakfu* and overseeing various ports wasn't enough, early April also sees the release of a new version of *Dofus* dedicated to UK gamers. With a new storyline and episodic delivery, there will also be specific events available only on the UK server. Although the game content will remain largely faithful to *Dofus*, details are few on what kind of special elements to expect, though the addition of a UK community manager suggests Ankama is taking the new version seriously. Those interested in finding out more should check out www.dofus.co.uk







Alongside subscription, *Wakfu* may also use virtual asset purchase, so a character can be upgraded for a fee. There are balancing concerns with such a system, but the care with which Ankama is approaching the project bodes well





Frontier's landscapes are as beautiful as other *Monster Hunter* games, and at times take good advantage of a modern PC's graphical abilities, although a tendency towards icefields may make for a starker adventure



Monster Hunter Frontier

Capcom's Japanese favourite heads back to the PSP and crosses the frontier to PCs

Few videogames shed light on the mythical east-west divide quite like *Monster Hunter*. Ignored in the west as clunky oddities whose prettiness hides awkward controls and tedious missions, for a Japanese audience Capcom's series is a guaranteed bestseller, and the kind of game Microsoft has so far found itself completely unable to reverse-engineer for the 360.

Such is its success in its home market that *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* sold 750,000 copies on day one of its Japanese release – a pretty good trick at the best of times, but a feat of near-Herculean proportions given its platform, the struggling PSP.

While it's gone on to be the handheld's first million-seller in Japan (closely followed by the original *Monster Hunter Freedom*, pushed over the edge by the budget release), the game's hopes look slightly different when it comes to western shores. Essentially an expanded port of PS2's *Monster Hunter 2*, *Freedom 2* features the same odd mix of histrionic dinosaur slaying and prosaic item gathering as the originals, and seems likely to continue to infuriate western gamers.



Taking up where *Monster Hunter Freedom* left off, the sequel seems just as able when it comes to squeezing the most out of the PSP's graphics. It continues the recent trend for cautious embellishment in a game's sequel







Some players continue to find *Monster Hunter*'s controls awkward, as Capcom attempts to convey the sensation of the large, cumbersome weapons needed to kill dinosaurs

The big change this time around is the addition of fourplayer battling via wifi, which will also be used for downloadable content such as extra maps and missions. However, the PSP franchise continues to lack the one feature that made the original PS2 *Monster Hunter* so compelling – true online multiplayer.

For that, fans of the series will have to look beyond consoles to the forthcoming *Monster Hunter Frontier*, due on PC later this year. Indications so far suggest that Capcom is proceeding into the online space with extreme caution, preferring to play to the series' strengths as a party-based slasher rather than turning it into a full-blown MMORPG. Like Sega's *Phantasy Star Online*, players can band together in teams of four to hunt, and although its tentative approach is risky in its own way – potentially excluding those who hoped for a more extreme departure – with over 100,000 requests to take part in the second beta test, the success of *Frontier* (in its native country at least) seems assured.

While the series has successfully faced down one great dragon, providing Japanese gamers with a real and convincing reason to own Sony's handheld, the next task is no less difficult. In conquering, *Monster Hunter* has also divided – and with real success in the current generation going to those able to unite an increasingly fragmented global audience, gathering the combined potential of eastern and western markets together may prove one quest too many for Capcom.

FORMAT: **PSP (FREEDOM 2) PC (FRONTIER)**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**



Green eyed monster

With sales remaining sluggish when compared to the Wii, it's inevitable that Sony's latest console would be looking to the *Monster Hunter* franchise with envy. Despite a lack of offical confirmation, a PS3 version is a certainty, and Capcom has already suggested that the PlayStation Network would be a perfect match, although it's not clear whether that's for online play or DLC. The best indicator of how the series will evolve seems to be *Frontier*, suggesting a gentle movement towards online play but leaving the central mechanics largely unchanged.

FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PARADIGM**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Stuntman: Ignition

A cunning stunt for Paradigm, or another box office crash?

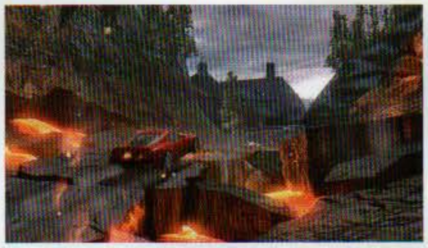


In total, over 25 different vehicles are available including sports cars, trucks, bikes and hovercraft. Revisiting stunts in a new ride adds variety and hopefully a little more than just an aesthetic difference to the experience



Driving to order

Just as in the original – instructions from your director are pumped into your helmet as you drive – telling you where to head next and what to do there. These work surprisingly well, given the sheer amount of noise created by the various explosions, but are made redundant by the games garish HUD. Yellow icons depicting the exact stunt and exact placement litter the screen, offering the same information as the director but removing much of the tension built from the environment. It may make for a more exciting pay-off after the show when watching your efforts icon-free, but it's excitement that would be put to much better use during the actual game.









The six movies resemble closely the big budget blockbusters they're based upon. You shouldn't have a hard time recognising titles such as Dante's Peak or Deep Impact even though the film titles have been changed

The initial concept for *Stuntman* back in 2002 was a strong one. Step into the shoes (and helmet) of a top Hollywood stuntman as he journeys through his movie career, performing all the high-octane vehicular stunts for each of the six films (and genres) featured. Launching at the peak of Reflections' driving game success following series like *Destruction Derby* and *Driver*, *Stuntman* initially seemed like an irresistible melding of the two franchises and the perfect title to showcase the team's talents for the first time on 'next generation technology'. And so, in spite of its flaws, the original *Stuntman* was reasonably well received, its repetitive play and the horribly unforgiving difficulty curve notwithstanding. Gamers went easy on the title, enthused by its novel idea, cool pay-offs (with dramatic replays embedded into movie trailers) and the building excitement created around Reflections' other PS2 debut then in the works: *Driver 3*.

So the original *Stuntman* seemingly had a purpose. Flash forward five years and one console generation, switch publishers and call in Paradigm to develop and the series is being revived. *Stuntman: Ignition*, an apparent new take on the same core idea only without the timeliness of the original. Unfortunately, at first glance, *Ignition* impressively falls into not one, but all of the pitfalls of the original title.

The problem is simple. There's no down time. Take all of the 'best bits' of any vehicle-based action game and compile them together and you're left with just that, a compilation of 'best bits', devoid of all the humdrum necessary for the stand-out moments to feel like rewards. Pelting through each movie-themed disaster-piece is a messy affair as you're assaulted from all angles by imminent danger. The onscreen prompts are of little help too, allowing minimal room for error and often leaving you confused and frustrated rather than excited and adrenalin-fuelled. Admittedly, the unforgivable preciseness of the original has been loosened, now allowing you to make up to five mistakes en route before being hoisted back to the start for another take, but the short, unclear, point-to-point nature of the game means it won't be until the same course has been attempted five or six times (and committed to memory), that you'll be making any real progress – thus killing any glimmer of excitement or tension and putting emphasis on chaining stunts together and maxing out your score as the only rationale for continued play.

At this point, *Ignition* captures one particular aspect of a real stuntman perfectly: the lack of free thought. Being so explicitly directed through a dramatic escape invariably feels as tame as it sounds, as though its someone else – the offscreen hero – who's having all the real fun.





Each stunt successfully completed is suitably impressive and certainly wouldn't be amiss in a blockbuster. It's just a shame the events fail to offer the same level of excitement during play











With its army focus, most units will be ground, amphibian or light aircraft. But heavy air support can be bought with aid points

World In Conflict

Ground Control to major ruin: Massive's new quickfire RTS turns up the heat on the Cold War

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

For people of a certain age – let's be explicit; for those of us who grew up in the '80s under the twin shadows of the mushroom cloud and Thatcher's perm – the military and geopolitical details of the time are always going to carry an unmistakable tang of dread and excitement. Massive, maker of the *Ground Control* series, is brilliantly exploiting the association in this atmospheric action-strategy game. Like the neon nuke parabolas of Introversion's *DefCon*, it has a contemporary cinematic inspiration, but in this case it's Red Dawn, not War Games. Set in 1989, it pictures a Soviet invasion of US soil: rocket plumes and Red propaganda looming darkly over Spielberg and King's idealised small-town America.

The scenario has the USSR carrying out a threat to invade Europe after it's denied aid by the UN, and then moving to the US. Confirmed campaign settings include rural France and the crucial battleground of the streets of Seattle, as well as a picturesque Midwest, but we also see a multiplayer map depicting a snowbound Russian town. The instantly familiar milieu is *World In Conflict*'s first step towards being a more accessible RTS, but not its most important.

Developer Massive is pursuing the elusive firstperson action audience in both single- and multiplayer, and appealing to their sensibilities across several fronts. The campaign casts you not as an all-seeing general but a faceless captain, who conceptually could be in any one of your units on the ground, to get that sense of being part of a wider conflict evoked by *Medal Of Honor* and *Call Of Duty*. Controls centre on the PC staples of WASD and mouselook, but base-building and resource management have been completely stripped out, with a clever recharging credit system taking their place. It's hoped this will give the 16-player, 20-minute-long multiplayer matches the drop-in immediacy and pace of *Counter-Strike*.

"Personally I think RTS games are stuck with the base-building thing. What we really wanted was respawn," says senior designer **Nicklas Cedeström**. The solution is a fixed amount of unit credits which are replenished when you lose them, filling up faster the greater your deficit is; an elegant system that should also encourage experimentation in singleplayer. Results are encouraging. "It's so interesting to have the RTS fans against the FPS fans in our test lab. It' a clash of the titans. It's close. And we're working a lot with Electronic Sports League, the European version of CPL [Cyberathlete Professional League] to make sure they get all the features they want to see in the game to make it successful among pro gamers."

Of course it's just as possible that *World In Conflict*'s tight scale and limited strategic flexibility will end up alienating the RTS hardcore, or that its speed and cinematic punch won't be enough to win round those put off by the genre's peculiar blend of detachment and stress. But we wouldn't count on it, especially with the dark thrill of the nuclear era acting as the very opposite of a deterrent.



Despite the smoke effects, the game's approach to fog of war actually uses lines of sight – zoom out to the mega map and a line defines the area visible to your units



Strategy will focus on capturing and owning command points. These can be taken back at any time, which, given the recharging credits, means there should be no such thing as a point of no return

Cedeström is especially proud of the extent of *World In Conflict*'s environmental destructibility, and the ability to turn any beautiful location into an "ashtray". But just as effective as a mood modifier are the game's stunning skies, whose 3D clouds morph from breezy, puffy white to boiling black as battle progresses





Emote and conquer

"It's so hard to make a game emotional when you're so detached from the actual units, you're zoomed out and they're just dots on the screen," says Cedeström. As part of its accessibility drive, Massive is struggling to humanise the RTS. Although the player-character remains faceless, the story sketches out other unit commanders in more detail and features moody, slow-mo cut-scenes soundtracked with Tears For Fears. Zoom the camera in on any unit and you'll hear radio chatter (in the relevant language) illustrating the troops' state of mind, while AI units give text updates of their situation in multiplayer.





Players can swap between Mario, Peach and Bowser. Peach can float over gaps with her parasol while Bowser can employ flaming breath – he is once again the real comic star of the show, his heroic teaming with Mario undermined by the irresistible lure of villainy



The glove symbol behind Mario is the throwing Pixl. A tap of 1 grabs nearby enemies and allows them to be lobbed. Other Pixls can blow objects up, shrink Mario down and flip him sideways, allowing him to squeeze through gaps

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Super Paper Mario

It's the platformer that's actually an RPG, in the Wii game that's actually a GameCube game

Intended as the GameCube's swansong, *Super Paper Mario* was seized from that particular slender throat and thrust instead into the beak of Nintendo's cygnet, the Wii. What could have been a noble farewell to the Cube was instead pilfered with little justification and left in the shadows until it re-emerged in March as the backbone of Nintendo's offerings at GDC. The game revealed was fundamentally a carbon copy, albeit visually brightened and sharpened, of the GameCube version – with a few Remote twitchings added for good measure.

In a development sure to please both misty-eyed Mario fans and the new breed of Virtual Console retro-initiates, the game plays for the most part like traditional *Super Mario Bros.* A 2D combination of head-bouncing foe dispatching and platform navigation, it requires the Remote to be held horizontally, employing the D-pad and two button setup.

While the 2 button sends Mario into his traditional cranial crushing leap, you're reminded that this is a continuation of his RPG franchise when his foot does not destroy the Koopa but generates a small hit point indicator. A second bound acts as a finishing blow, and by shaking the Remote at the zenith a victorious pirouette is performed, replacing the rather staid timed-button-press 'stylish' attack system of past Mario RPGs.

Adding literal depth to the 2D exploration is Mario's new-found dimensional flip ability. Pressing A at any time pauses the action and swivels the world into 3D – a bit of spatial manipulation crying out for some Remote twizzling jiggery-pokery – allowing Mario to saunter by those 2D obstacles that previously stood in his way (see 'Flipping great').

The biggest Wii innovation – and it's a push to call it that – is the application of Tippy, the info-giving butterfly 'Pixl' that accompanies Mario on his journey. By aiming the Remote towards the screen, as with Link's various projectiles in *Twilight Princess*, the action pauses and the pointer acts as an enlightening beam, offering tactical titbits and revealing hidden items.

Intelligent Systems is proving somewhat schizophrenic with its approach to the Wii. On one hand *WarioWare* flails enthusiastically in the corner and on the other *Super Paper Mario* and *Fire Emblem: Goddess Of Dawn* exude quality but sit uneasily, faking it on Wii when they should be helping the Cube go out in style, as opposed to leaving it with *Shrek Smash'n'Crash Racing* as a rather shameful bookend.









Flipping great

Flipping the environment may not always be necessary, but experimentation is encouraged by cunning perspective tricks at every step. Hit-point-eating battles can be neatly circumvented as screen-engulfing fiends are revealed to exist only on the 2D plane, and where five coins awaits the 2D dweller, in 3D this becomes a field of coins stretching across the screen. The biggest treat, however, is simply in seeing those familiar commonplace pieces of Mario level furniture – the '?' block and destructible brick platforms so engrained on retinas after years of playing – finally reveal their hidden depths.

No doubt in a nod to *New Super Mario Bros*, giant retro Mario clomps through all enemies and platforms in his way. When his destruction time runs out he returns to his normal size





FORMAT: **PSP, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **WAHOO STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Space Station Tycoon

The Wii heads for the stars, but is strategy the right strategy?



Little is known at this stage about how the game will function on the PSP, though the focus on puzzle-like management should make the title suited to the short bursts of gaming common on handhelds

While the Wii struggles to find software to meaningfully call its own, those who fear that the platform is rapidly filling up with PS2 ports can at least draw some small relief from the fact that *Space Station Tycoon* has graduated from Xbox Live Arcade. Yet, according to Wahoo Studios, the Utah-based developer behind the forthcoming management sim, this is far more than just a port of its previous title, *Outpost Kaloki X*. *Tycoon* will feature new characters and storylines with its own, distinctly Nintendo, ambience.

The basic gameplay remains the same, however, as players are tasked with building and managing space stations, expanding and customising their services and raising revenue in order to progress to the next level. Elements such as space pirate attacks and a cast of characters that includes monkeys and whales suggests that *Space Station Tycoon* falls firmly on the softer side of strategy simulations, with the overall focus on the fun rather than the figures.

The chunky, colourful visuals seem well-suited to the Wii, even if is hard to see the Remote being anything more than a glorified mouse pointer, and despite the absence of online modes, the inclusion of co-op is a pleasant surprise, though perhaps risky for this most introverted of gaming genres.

But it's still hard to shake the feeling that *Space Station Tycoon* is a game that remains more suited to the DS, hinting that developers and publishers alike remain stuck attempting to emulate the handheld's success directly rather than figuring out a way to make the trickier Wii work in its own right.



Space Station Tycoon's screens currently seem cluttered with icons and stats, suggesting that the game's business aspects may be meatier than the art style would suggest



Wing Commander Arena

The Kilrathi are back, this time without Mark Hamill to chase after

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **GALA INDUSTRIES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

EA's persistence in the upkeep of its dynastic stable of sequels and spin-offs is second to none – from *Command & Conquer* to *Lord Of The Rings*, from *Madden* to *Need For Speed*, the publisher's reputation for formulaic conservatism certainly precedes it. On the one hand *Wing Commander Arena* is no exception, continuing the intergalactic war between humanity's Terran Confederation and the feline, Klingon-like Kilrathi on a contemporary console. On the other hand, the fact that *Wing Commander*'s 17-year-old IP will now sit afresh on 360 Live Arcade proves *Arena* is far more than just a simple nostalgic redux.

For a start, the whole gameplay dynamic has shifted to satisfy the casual demands of the arcade format. Ships are now controlled in thirdperson, scrapping the traditional cockpit window devotees will know well. Control systems in the previous *Wing Commander* instalments relied just as much on manoeuvring as firing, a mechanism that would seem out of place in the fast, deathmatch focus of *Arena*. Multiplayer offers up space for 16 players and allows for the first time the chance to play as the Kilrathi – something particularly tempting for those who have spent a long time destroying the evil cat-people.

What the franchise gains in immediacy, however, it loses in terms of cinematic scope. Gone are the FMV inserts that punctuated the series from the mid '90s onwards in a concession to Microsoft's imposed Live Arcade size restrictions. Some new elements also seem directly inspired by traditional shmups – destroying meteors and some ridiculously enormous bosses are just two examples. Whether *Wing Commander Arena* can stand up to repeated play will be its greatest test, but wherever it leads it will at least revive the prospect of a proper return for the franchise.



Although graphically slightly unambitious, *Wing Commander*'s arenas seem interesting enough to provide players with a variety of situations in which to battle



Players will be able to choose from six ships (three from either side). Despite the shift to a thirdperson view, the radar has remained a stable part of the series since 1990



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Treasure Island Z

Break out the rum! Z marks the spot in Capcom's less-than-faithful adaptation of the classic novel

Based on Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island only in as much that it features an island with treasure on it, Capcom's new riddle-based puzzler tells the story of Zack, a wannabe swashbuckler led to a magical island by the talking skull of a legendary pirate, Barbaros. He's promised to hand over his buried treasure if Zack can restore his body – a familiar Faustian pact.

Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins producer Hironobu Takeshita is attempting to craft a Wii title that just wouldn't work on any other console, and puzzles will focus on using the Remote in unusual and exciting ways. It'll be accessible, however – If you get stuck at any point you can call upon the God of Hints, a bizarre clown/angel hybrid creature suspended from the top of the screen. Cleverly, at the end of each area, you can use the Wii's internet connection to see how many hints other people used according to age demographic. Each level culminates in a treasure-hoarding boss, who can only be defeated via creative use of the Remote.



Zack has the kind of gadgets Jim Hawkins could only dream of – in addition to the Serpent Magic Hand seen here, which can interact with the environment in unexpected ways, you also have a piccolo, a tree-chopping chainsaw and an umbrella

It's a welcome return to the candy-coloured design traits that the Osaka-based gaming giant was once known for, and a relief to Wii owners increasingly concerned that Capcom's release schedule for the machine was going to feature little more than a half-baked *Resident Evil* spin-off and a *Devil Kings* sequel.

If all goes well, this could be the best treasure hunting adventure since Guybrush Threepwood first declared: "I want to be a pirate!"





The island is divided up into small areas, each featuring self-contained puzzles and riddles that must be solved to progress. Gamers will be genuinely astonished to discover that levels take place in environments as varied as jungles, ice temples and volcanic caves

Opoona

Koei eschews feudal China for outer space and floating balls in its first Wii RPG







FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **ARTEPIAZZA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Koei may not have a great deal of experience in the RPG field, but the developer certainly knows how to buy in the talent. As a result, *Opoona* is being created by something of an all-star RPG team: the music is to be produced by Hitoshi Sakimoto, the composer responsible for *Final Fantasy XII*'s lush orchestral score, while developers ArtePiazza were instrumental in the *Dragon Quest* series' SNES and PlayStation days before Level 5 took up the mantle. Judging by the wonderful Fisher Price-does-*Phantasy Star Online* look the development team has come up with, it seems that Koei's faith has been well rewarded here.

Separated from his family on the planet Landroll, the titular Opoona is on a quest through the planet's various colonies to track them down, armed only with an Energy Bonbon that hovers above his head. Using the wonderfully named Active Bonbon Battle System the ball can be charged with the analogue stick and then flung with a flick of the Nunchuck – a little like the *Dead Or Alive Xtreme* series, the game is designed to be played entirely one-handed.

Travelling between the planet's colonies requires licences. These licences are essentially jobs, and it's up to you to decide what kind of career you wish to pursue, be it detective, pop idol or rescuer. There are more than 20 in total, and the profession you choose will determine how NPCs react to you. It all looks promising – let's hope they don't balls it up.



ArtePiazza specialises in character design and its efforts here are certainly bold. The Kubrick-style faces have been kept deliberately simple to emphasise emotions



As your skills improve, so do your enemies'. They'll catch your ball later on, meaning you'll have to keep upgrading

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (US, UK)**



Soul Cradle

Disgaea does team deathmatch, in Nippon Ichi's latest little-big planet for PS2

There's no point trying to convince an outsider that *Soul Cradle* is new territory for Nippon Ichi. The battle-hungry sprites, gridded maps, stat-splattered HUD arrays and cutscenes talked out on a static backdrop of artworks see to that. But it is a moderate departure from the past four NI SRPGs that have made it to the west – this time each unit that appears on battlefield is a 'room', a 3x3 grid hosting a configuration of troops. Their position governs just how they'll operate during an attack, with healers casting spells over all units when placed at the very rear, instead of on just one character when placed closer to the front, for instance. Combat takes place on an *Advance Wars*-style split screen, the instigators getting first blood before the squad on defence returns fire with a guaranteed counterattack.

It's these rooms that function as the characteristic Nippon Ichi wellspring of depth, with purchasable and unlockable slabs featuring preset layouts for troop formations, and other effects, as well as allowing you to go 'into' them in a manner not unfamiliar to Item Dungeon veterans. Further troops can be purchased – at higher levels if you've got the gold – with defeated enemy types typically expanding those ranks.

Maps are represented by parchments, with their geographical details – forests and mountains – sketched onto them. It's a move that instantly counters the navigational problems of past Nippon Ichi titles and the sometimes vexing undulation of their stages, but it's a grubby style choice next to the energetic characters scattered across them.

But, there's no point in trying to convince an insider that *Soul Cradle* isn't brand new territory for Nippon Ichi. Those changes outlined above – yet alone any deeper aspects that emerge once the power-levelling specialists get going – are substantial enough to soothe any heartburn caused by bingeing on a rich diet of *Disgaea 2*.



Other units can be called into battle to back up the hero's 'room', with a literal asking price in terms of the gold needing to be spent. End-of-stage payouts – and bonus items for meeting certain criteria – are often generous enough to prevent it becoming a snag



Soul Cradle's tone is more sober and epic than the goofy approach adopted by *Makai Kingdom* and *Disgaea*. Even the soundtrack stands apart from the norm, with an arrangement that wouldn't be amiss in an *Atelier Iris* titl





FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

PSU: Illuminas No Yabo

Phantasy Star Universe's expansion arrives at the speed of light, but will it suck new players in?

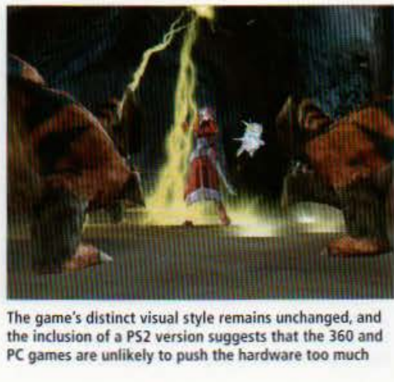
Phantasy Star Universe seems destined to remain misunderstood. Having failed to live up to the grandiose expectations of those desiring a console *WOW*, while quietly alienating series fans who wanted a return to the smaller, rarefied community that sprang up around the Dreamcast version, the announcement of *PSU: Illuminas No Yabo* will surprise many who felt that Sega was more likely to pull the plug on the pastel and neon universe than commit to a second round.

While a standalone game in its own right, *Illuminas* is an expansion at heart. Keeping many elements from the original *PSU*, promised improvements include new skills and weapons (four new categories of SUVs to add to the existing six) along with new monsters and locations. The minor nature of these changes, coupled with Sega's wilfully strange focus on improving areas like CG cutscenes, suggest that Sonic Team may not truly care about winning over the *WarCraft* crowds at all, and is now more committed to bringing *Phantasy Star* back to its original audience.

The most promising overall change throughout is the gentle shift of focus towards the online adventure, including an overhaul of the lobbies and increased options for customising your own room. The biggest potential snag remains the inclusion of the PS2 in the release roster, holding back the 360 and PC versions, and suggesting that the real overhaul the series requires will probably have to wait until the PS3 can be brought into the fold.

Among the new areas announced is a casino, presumably stocked with minigames for time-wasting and currency grinding, but the hack 'n' slash fighting remains the same





The game's distinct visual style remains unchanged, and the inclusion of a PS2 version suggests that the 360 and PC games are unlikely to push the hardware too much

Guitar Hero II

Box-rocking beats, as Harmonix re-releases an instant classic on 360. But is it worth converting?



The game has benefited from its graduation to HD, the characters increasing in solidity, and the on-stage special effects gaining some sparkle. The result is almost, but only almost, enough to drag your gaze off the notes

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **APRIL**

If it were a racing game, this would be an unusually generous package: *Guitar Hero II* adds ten extra tracks for the 360 conversion of the PS2 original, taking its total to more than 70. Nor are they filler: Iron Maiden's The Trooper, Deep Purple's Hush and Alice Cooper's Billion Dollar Babies adding their heavyweight credentials to newer tracks from My Chemical Romance and Rancid. But this isn't a racing game, so instead what you want to know about is how the new guitar – modelled on the Gibson X-plorer – feels, whether or not the stickers are cool, if the button action feels different and when more tracks (as if 70 could ever be enough) will become available for download.

The new guitar acquits itself well, even if the mini 360 button looks a little cheesy, and manually triggering star-power proves a little fiddly. The elongated shape gives you somewhere to rest your arm, making long sessions less ruinous to your tendons, and the action is otherwise identical to the solid performance of its siblings. Otherwise, it's not a game that benefits much from being on 360. The (rather bland) Achievements have rarely been so irrelevant, since the game has more motivation than they could ever supply. And with no confirmation yet on co-operative or competitive Live play, all eyes will be on the purchasable song list when the game launches, as there's still no advance word on tracks, prices or frequency of release. And the stickers? Stickers are *always* cool.



The new guitar (below, right) looks less toy-like and more expensive than the SG of the previous games, but the plastic isn't kind to its white-on-white simplicity, and the result can look anaemic and unfinished, until you unleash the stickers



Heroes Of Mana

It really is an RTS, even if your resource gatherers are Rabites and your base is a dragon-shaped air-barge



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **BROWNIE BROWN**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

There's something a little tortuous about being a *Secret Of Mana* fan, as all the energy and creativity that currently surrounds the series creates game after game that isn't quite the sequel you've longed for. *Heroes* is another side-step, after the dungeon crawling of *Children*, this time adding a strategic take.

All the basic RTS tropes are here – build bases (handily hidden inside your airship), gather resources, spawn troops and sally forth into battle. A quick circle of the stylus will unite units into groups, and simple, context-sensitive taps will issue basic commands. The result is fast-paced, challenging and inarguably distinctive: despite the interface opportunities the DS offers, this is one of the first games to successfully translate the RTS' appeal from mouse to touchscreen. The *Mana* charm is also abundant, with cute creatures and awkward aristocrats bounding about around lush, detailed backdrops.

But one thing threatens to undo all this: the pathfinding. Group together a few grunts, set them off towards a target, and a couple will stray, ruining the value of a combined assault and probably triggering a couple of extra attackers on the way. Although the game tries to communicate their likely path, even this fix seems unreliable, and it can feel like you're spending as much time fretting over footwork as about planning a successful strategy. It's an odd thing to let down a game so clearly accomplished in almost every other respect.



Battles are mostly clumsy scrums, but the ease and speed with which you can respawn replacement units takes the sting out of seeing an unwise sortie result in a massacre



Units can only leave the airship at anchor points. Pulling up the chain protects your HQ from melee attacks, but it remains vulnerable to ranged and magical assaults

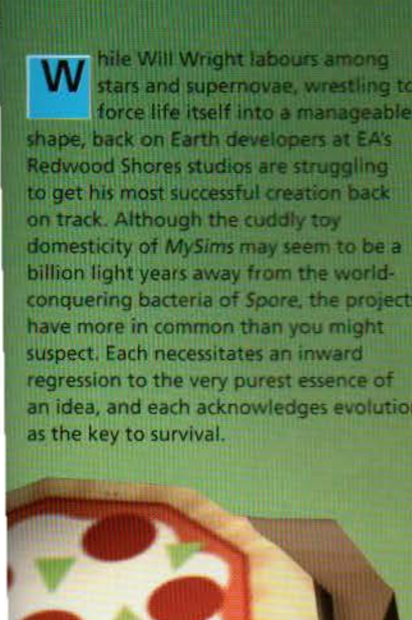


Simple pleasures



Reborn in a brave new form on Nintendo consoles, can EA successfully reinvent one of its biggest sellers?

While Will Wright labours among stars and supernovae, wrestling to force life itself into a manageable shape, back on Earth developers at EA's Redwood Shores studios are struggling to get his most successful creation back on track. Although the cuddly toy domesticity of *MySims* may seem to be a billion light years away from the world-conquering bacteria of *Spore*, the projects have more in common than you might suspect. Each necessitates an inward regression to the very purest essence of an idea, and each acknowledges evolution as the key to survival.



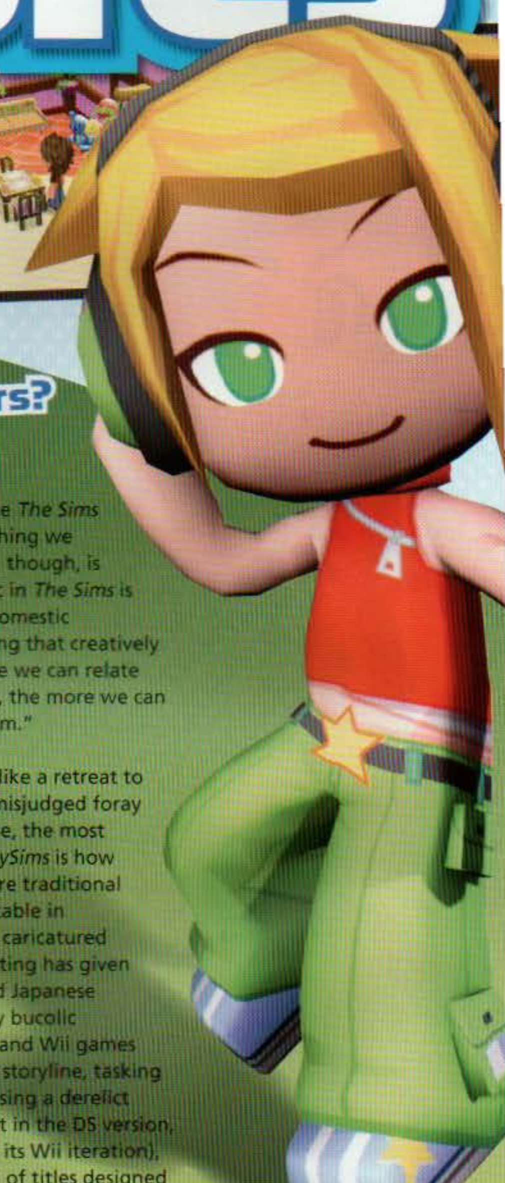
Although it remains comfortably the most successful PC franchise of all time, it's hard to shake the feeling that recent *Sims* titles have seen the series slip both in terms of ambition and, with the charmless *Urbz* variant, sales. Unfair though such a branding may be, without Will Wright at the helm, *The Sims* can at times look like just another EA franchise – generally competent, but faintly antiseptic. The series' relative stagnation, along with its continued inability to shift units in Japan, has meant that reinvention has been a prospect for some time. Now, with the DS triumphant and the Wii selling out around the world, *The Sims* has turned chameleon, rebranding itself almost overnight to fit in alongside cherished Nintendo products.

And perhaps it's an ideal match. **Tim LeTourneau**, the executive producer of *MySims*, which debuts this autumn on both the DS and the Wii, certainly seems to think so. "*The Sims* is definitely a franchise that bridges many demographic boundaries. It's played by young and old, male and female, with each finding something just for them in it. I think that the DS and now the Wii have crossed those same boundaries. This is why *MySims* has found such a perfect home.

"We learn something new in taking *The Sims* in new directions," he admits, "whether it is something bold like *The Urbz* or more classic like *The Sims 2 Seasons*. I think the thing we learned with *The Urbz*, though, is that some of the magic in *The Sims* is definitely tied to the domestic experience, and bringing that creatively to the screen. The more we can relate to the lives of the Sims, the more we can laugh at and enjoy them."

But if that sounds like a retreat to safer ground after its misjudged foray into the concrete jungle, the most striking thing about *MySims* is how much of the series' more traditional aspects it feels comfortable in jettisoning. The gently caricatured humans and sitcom setting has given way to super-deformed Japanese designs and a blossomy bucolic environment. Both DS and Wii games feature the same basic storyline, tasking the player with revitalising a derelict setting (an island resort in the DS version, a ramshackle village in its Wii iteration), and both have the feel of titles designed from the ground up with the Japanese market firmly in mind.

The most notable departure from the series norm, the appearance of the Sims themselves, played a key role in this transition. "We wanted characters that would look at home on the Nintendo systems, and looked to one of our very



TITLE: **MYSIMS**
FORMAT: **DS, WII**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2007**

talented character artists to reinterpret *The Sims* to achieve that goal," explains LeTourneau. "Emmy Toyonaga has worked on *The Sims 2* PC team for several years. Like most of the *MySims* team, she is a huge Nintendo fan. When she showed us her character concepts, we realised they were the perfect compliment to a game about building a town from building blocks." The expansive character creation tool, bristling with all manner of haircut, eyeball and tattoo options, amongst many others, seems perfectly in tune with the Wii in particular, but LeTourneau plays down any link with Nintendo's own Mii creation suite. "We began development of *MySims* in January 2006 when The Wii was still called The Revolution," he laughs, "and when the only people that knew about the Miis were inside Nintendo."

But not all of *MySims*' references are as accidental. Like the chunky, lovable Sims,









the world they now inhabit also calls to mind Nintendo's own toybox legacy rather than the series' traditional Americana – and the patchwork grass designs, along with the flattened and stylised building textures, make comparisons with *Animal Crossing* somewhat inevitable. "I think all game developers are inspired by all the games they've ever played," admits LeTourneau, broadly. "I definitely reference moments that inspired me – both positive and negative. Ultimately, I think that the important thing is that developers have a vision for what they want their game to be, regardless of genre and those that came before, and that they stay true to it."

But the *Animal Crossing* comparison, so easy to make, may only be skin deep – a closer look reveals a title with

"Developers are inspired by all the games they've ever played"



surface similarities but deep philosophical differences lurking beneath them. If *Animal Crossing* is a game that lets you take part in a wider – and often slightly uncaring – world, *MySims* wants you to take direct control. On both DS and Wii, this is playtime with firm goals in mind. Once again, success in the Sims universe means being popular, this time by creating and nurturing a community that will lure new characters in and keep them there. Playing down the eating and drinking imperatives that gave the original versions their gloriously self-involved sting, *MySims*



"I think all *Sims* games have an impact on other *Sims* games," says LeTourneau. "With each release we learn something more about the games and our players"



"We wanted the idea of creativity right at the centre of the gameplay, because it is enabling creativity that is at the heart of the *Sims* experience," explains LeTourneau

places the focus on character interaction. That's why much of the game is spent interpreting NPC's reactions to your own choices – finding out what they want, and making sure they get it – and an elaborate relationships menu is on hand to chart every fluctuation of mood variation you cause in those around you. "*MySims* is ultimately about little people in a domestic world, with toys to unlock player creativity and personal expression," summarises LeTourneau. "The magic of *The Sims* has always been in being able to see a bit of ourselves on the screen, both in the behaviour of *The Sims* and the environment we create for them."

Create being the operative word, because – looks aside – the real innovation in *MySims*, and another major point of difference with *Animal Crossing*, lies with building rather than collecting. Everything in the *MySims* world, be it a chef's pizza oven or an entire cottage, is built from blocks. Players are free to build and expand on every item in the game by dragging and dropping pieces, filling out simple wireframes to create any object required of them. Initial tasks are small – building a table or chairs for another character – but eventually blossom into laying out streets and parks, offering real control over the environment.

The building blocks themselves are either discovered through exploration or rationed out as prizes for aiding NPCs. While the game's system, involving not only basic blocks but more complex elements called essences, which can be used in customisation, may be unnecessarily complicated, moving the pieces about using either the stylus or Remote seems simple and intuitive. The item creation menu has an engaging wooden-toy solidity to it, and the wireframe guidance system seems to be perfectly tailored for a title that will need to help younger players along while also giving older gamers room to riff and elaborate. And getting that balance right has proved difficult for the developers. "That's the hardest challenge," acknowledges LeTourneau. "Approachability versus freedom. You

"The magic of The Sims is in seeing ourselves on the screen"



want a system that everyone can use easily, yet you want it to have enough flexibility to allow creativity. This is the challenge of every *Sims* game – regardless of platform. The Wii has definitely given us the opportunity to unlock your creativity and personal expression, and we have been refining and iterating on the creativity tools for nearly a year."



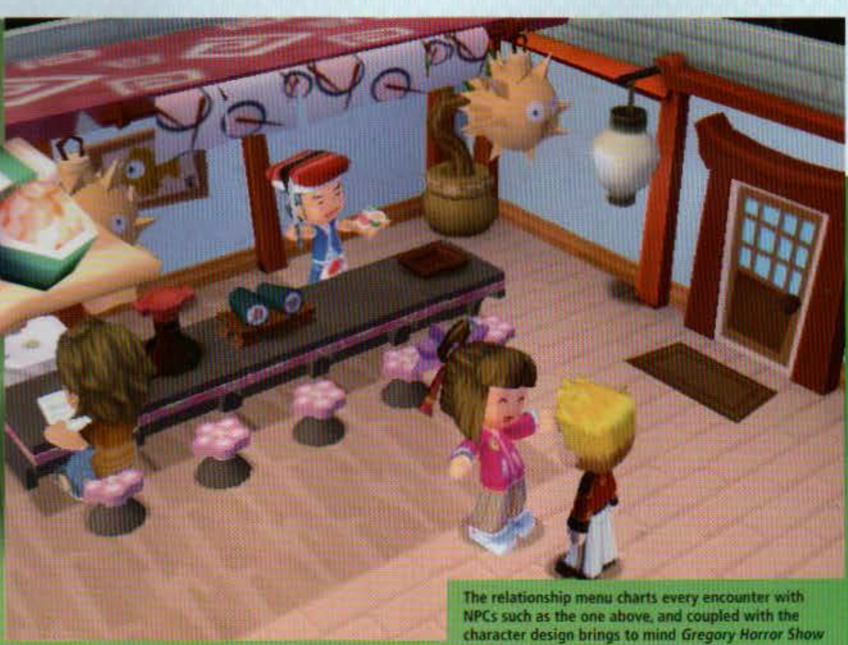
Those waiting for the DS version can expect a focus on minigames, in keeping with the handheld's past successes. And where there's water, there's bound to be fish to catch

Surprisingly, LeTourneau rules out any connectivity between the DS and Wii versions, and won't to confirm what, if any, online elements to expect. Even so, *MySims* is already looking comfortable in the Nintendo canon, and, targeted to specific hardware, provides a nice antidote to the steady tide of PS2 ports that wash up on the Wii's shoreline every month. But while the finished product may eventually duck the comparisons to *Animal Crossing* already being made, another forthcoming game may be harder to avoid. *LittleBigPlanet*, Sony's stealth attack on both Nintendo's heartland and creativity-centered games in general, may prove too disarming and original a rival for even *The Sims* to take on, and its promised online community will have little competition from Nintendo's cautious approach. But such battles aside, it will still be hard to write *MySims* off as another cheap and thoughtless cash-in. Charming and ambitious, the finished product seems unlikely to be remembered as just another bead on the licence's necklace, with that hole, by necessity, where its heart should be.



Similar but different

Characters in *MySims*, though suitably eccentric, often provide specific puzzles that must be solved to make them content and therefore willing to stay in the community. It's another departure from the strangely appealing *Animal Crossing* model, with its perpetually wayward, awkward and entirely changeable villagers who often react badly to slights real and imagined, and could mean that for all their charming design, the more easily understood Sims prove less engaging in the longer term.



The relationship menu charts every encounter with NPCs such as the one above, and coupled with the character design brings to mind *Gregory Horror Show*



THE SCOREBOARD JUNKIES AT BIZARRE CREATIONS EXPLAIN HOW THEY'RE PUTTING THE SKILL BACK INTO KILLS WITH THE CLUB

Room seems fair enough. So does *House Of The Dead*. But then we get on to *Tekken*. And *Tony Hawk*. Bizarre's own *Project Gotham Racing* and *Geometry Wars* come up. There's a surprisingly in-depth discussion of pinball. At one point someone, in all seriousness, mentions *Space Invaders*.

They aren't the influences you expect to hear about when discussing a gritty thirdperson shooter. But then Bizarre Creations isn't the company you expect to be developing one, either. That's demonstrably unfair: the team behind *The Club* is formed around the core of the team that made *Fur Fighters*, a murderously cute precursor to *Ratchet & Clank*'s toon shooting, in 2000 and 2001. But that is now an awfully long time ago, and aside from the following year's never-discussed *Treasure Planet* (licensed from Disney's never-discussed Treasure Planet movie) and the faintly reminiscent *The Killing Game Show*, the company's record is a string of racers all the way back to 1996's best-seller, *Formula One*. Which is probably why lead designer **Matt Cavanagh**, on one occasion, refers to bad guys as the game's 'corners'.

It may also be why design manager **Nick Davies**' bold claim that *The Club* is "redefining and refreshing the mechanics of the thirdperson shooter" seems, judging by our preview, to be a lot more than just empty rhetoric.

It's a genre as troubled as it is popular: a marketable equation of what players want to do (shoot to kill) with what they want to watch (themselves, shooting to kill) that, nine times out of ten, nonetheless struggles to strike a spark of individual style that will make up for the inconvenience of its perspective: the loss of the razor-sharp focus of its firstperson cousin. *Ghost Recon* and *Gears Of War* have found tremendous success by marrying thunderous, cinematic storytelling to the slow-burn tactics of cover and the grim

THE CLUB
360, PC, PS3
SEGA
BIZARRE CREATIONS
UK
TBC



Bizarre's staff make games that reflect way they play them: lead designer Matt Cavanagh (below left) obsessed over *Doom*'s Nightmare setting, while design manager Nick Davies (below right) says: "I skip every cutscene I can, I don't have the attention span"







Though they can seem generic at first glance, *The Club*'s characters are drawn and animated in exquisite, personality-revealing detail. Renwick (below) has a wedding ring swinging on a chain round his neck; he squints and chews a matchstick when aiming his weapon







thrill of taking fire. *The Club* does pretty much the exact opposite.

It's a fast game, very fast, a breathless headlong fusillade of bite-sized levels, game modes, character selection, leaderboards, combos and multipliers, set to the metronomic bass-bin thump that accompanies every kill. It's a score-attack game that rewards you for the reckless running and gunning years of stealth and duck-and-cover have tried to beat out: the faster you string kills together, the higher your score. A giant, ticking score looms in the top right, urging an incremental refinement in performance and skill, just one more go, one more restart. It may look conventional, but it's completely Bizarre: as Davies says, "an arcade game hidden inside a next-gen game."

Abstract retro cool doesn't sell full-price games, even to the hardcore – even with Sega stamped on the box, publishing Bizarre for the first time since *PGR*'s antecedent, *Metropolis Street Racer*. So Bizarre endowed *The Club* with characters and a premise, if not exactly a story – although it didn't start that way. "We prototyped it without any art assets at all," Cavanagh reveals. "So we started with basically an IP-less shooter with the scoring mechanism. And we actually went through quite a lot of iteration before we came up with what we've got at the moment – initially it was just a game about shooting targets, and then we found that really wasn't compelling."

The way to make such a purist's game plausible was, of course, to set it in a game itself. So Bizarre invented the Club – a shadowy cartel of drug lords, dotcom billionaires, rock stars and aristocracy – which stages a ruthless blood-sport in abandoned locations around the world for its own gambling and amusement. Hand-picked gunmen of the highest order are invited or coerced into taking part, and pitted against squads of mercenaries and each other in explosive, relentless projectile-weapon combat while the conspiratorial technocrats look on.

In this way the game is structured like a classic fighting game, furnishing each of its eight characters with a motivating backstory and pitching them into a tournament, but leaving the narrative glue at that. You'll select one combatant to take through the main singleplayer mode, which will lead you to the eight locations in sequence and cover a wide range of routes and around seven game styles in each, in the style of a *PGR* racing tournament. There will also be a free-play mode with free character, mode and location selection for scoreboard competition, and a multiplayer suite boasting as many gameplay styles again, if not

SPLITTING IMAGE

It's no surprise, given *PGR3*'s enduring popularity on Live, that Bizarre is putting a lot of effort into *The Club*'s online multiplayer. But there's an equally determined push behind a four-player split-screen mode that will cover the full gamut of competitive game modes, which the *Club* team unusually regard as a top priority. "Well, we miss it, to be honest," says Cavanagh, speaking nostalgically of *GoldenEye* and *TimeSplitters* sessions. "There are people who've still got N64s and still boot up *GoldenEye* for hours," notes Davies. "You wonder why people don't focus on this." He has high hopes that *The Club* will see a renaissance of the living-room deathmatch. "We'll cause Microsoft and Sony to sell more extra pads than any other game, I reckon."



A sense of speed equivalent to an arcade racer's is important to *The Club*, and it's powerfully conveyed when running at full pelt by hand-held shuddering of the camera and some of the most evocative motion blur we've ever seen in a videogame

more, from classic deathmatch to modes exploiting *The Club*'s rapid-fire scoring system.

Gruff and gritty as they are, and mostly modelled on nameless movie action heroes, the game's eight stars have a hint of classically Britsoft comic exaggeration about them. Dragov is a fur-hatted Siberian hunter with a drooping moustache and hulking build, an escaped convict, bandit and trapper festooned with his kills ("You will not see any more appropriate dead ferrets on a man's belt," notes Davies proudly). There's Renwick, a hard-bitten, matchstick-chewing American cop; Seager, a bleached-blond extreme-sports thrill junkie; Killen, an Aussie biker. A slick high-stakes gambler, a dreadlocked African warrior, a pretty-boy Asian gangster and a ludicrously sinister masked freak in bright yellow fisherman's all-weather gear make up the rest of the roster. A fairly varied line-up, though seldom straying too far from action game archetype, and heavy on the testosterone: female characters are one beat 'em up staple Bizarre has opted to leave out.





"YOU WILL NOT SEE ANY MORE APPROPRIATE DEAD FERRETS ON A MAN'S BELT"

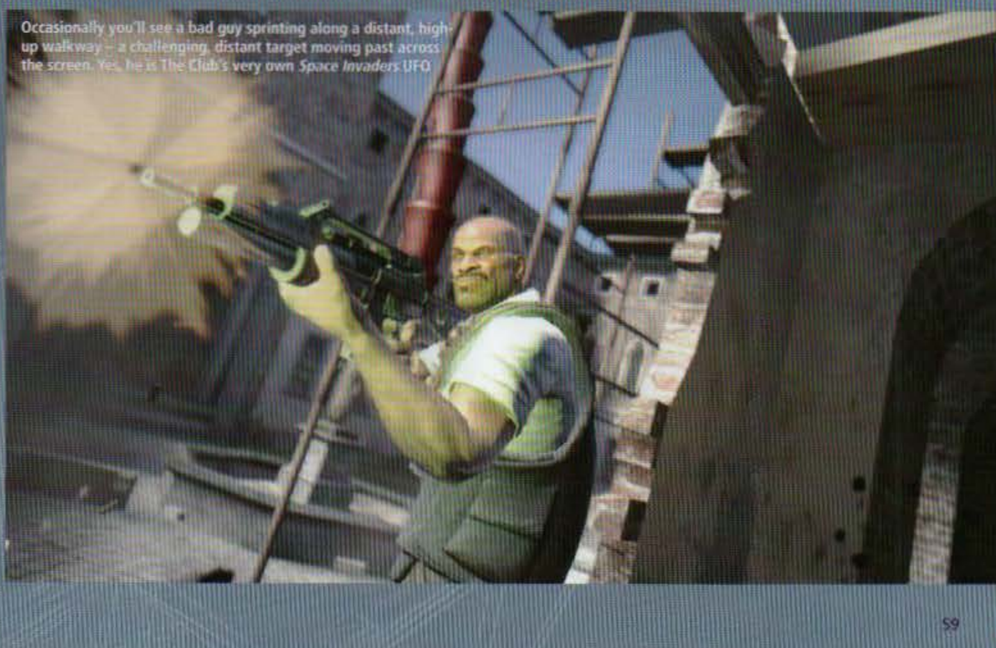
The larger-than-life characters go some way towards defusing the relentless violence, reckons Davies, and although they've been heavily focus-tested, Bizarre were looking for strong reactions of hate as well as love. "We tried to do it by committee, and just ended up with everyone watering down everyone else's best ideas," reveals Davies. "When everyone liked someone he'd be rubbish because he didn't have any character." Crucially, the characters will have different properties and probably promote different playing styles, although the team remains tight-lipped on what, beyond speed and health, the variations will be, as they're still deep in balancing. It's easy to imagine some will gain higher score bonuses from long-range shots, for example, while others excel at close-range move combos.

The barren locations' artful, hi-def dilapidation is already fairly familiar from the likes of *Ghost Recon* and *Gears*: the rusting German steel mill, bombed-out Baltic town and deserted US warehouse are impressive in detail and level design but unlikely to set gamers' hearts racing. More unusual and architecturally spectacular are the crumbling Venice alleyways – engineered for maximum destructibility – and the empty English manor house; but the most atmospheric we see, with perhaps the most interesting gameplay potential too, is a gorgeous art-deco ocean liner, long since run aground. They tread a fine line between huge (but far from sprawling) scale and contained, intricate design.

It's unlikely you'll have free reign to explore them though, or rather be given the incentive to. Each level will focus on a particular route through, or section of the location, the way *PGR* extracts tracks from street layouts. And they will be very short: three to five minutes.

"It's something we picked up from *Gotham*," says Davies. "There's this level where if you only get so far into a game and you make a mistake, you'll want to reboot and try again. You get past about three or four minutes of that you don't want to reboot because you've already invested a little too much time. So you've got a bit of what Martin calls a reboot racing feel, like in *PGR3* and you get to the first corner and mess it up, you don't mind pressing restart."

For a game heavily focused on long-term replayability and fostering a competitive culture among players in both single- and multiplayer, it was crucial to be open to that quick-start, perfectionist mindset, even if it runs counter to current received wisdom. "I guess the thing is



Occasionally you'll see a bad guy sprinting along a distant, high-up walkway – a challenging, distant target moving past across the screen. Yes, he is The Club's very own *Space Invaders* UFO

Bizarre's famously fastidious audio team has not just recorded the sound of impacts and footsteps on dozens of different materials – even the sound of empty casings ejected from your gun will be subtly different if they fall on concrete or wood





that the shorter the game levels are, the more important the micro-decisions become," Cavanagh says. "That's really what a lot of the game is about, literally where you shoot the enemy from."

The combos work on a principle of exponential acceleration. After each kill a combo meter starts to tick down. Make another kill before it reaches the bottom and you're rewarded with a score multiplier and the meter refreshes – but crucially, in an elegant stroke that is at the very heart of *The Club*, it now ticks down faster. At ten kills and 10x score you'll have a second or two; above that you'll have fractions. High risk equals high reward equals high tempo.

It's also possible to refresh your combo meter with pick-ups or by hitting skull shots, emblems stencilled on the game world that will run from the obvious to the deviously hidden. Over and above combos, your score for each kill is increased by the style of the execution. You'll be rewarded for accurate kills from range, appropriate use of the 20 or so weapons, headshots and other defined hit locations, kills after rolls or after smashing through doors, causing multiple explosions using the gas canisters scattered around levels and for several similarly-styled kills in a row. You'll even get a sizeable bonus for killing with a ricochet shot. If you can get it right, it promises to be an intoxicating crescendo.

Once played and enjoyed for the first time as a simple shooter, each level then essentially becomes an exercise in memory and precision, but with an element of cerebral, pattern-spotting puzzle thrown in. Piecing together the optimum order and route through your killing spree will be as much part of the high-end game as improving your dexterity and reactions, a hunt for score opportunities likened to wringing the best lines out of a *Tony Hawk's* skate park. For that reason, Bizarre is working hard to engineer enemy AI that is responsive enough to be convincing while sticking to a totally predictable, repeatable rhythm, which is what prompts Cavanagh to liken them to the corners of a racing track. He's convinced that, if the rewards are right, a reliance on foreknowledge and rote-learning are far from undesirable.

"One of the only shooters I've played in this kind of way was actually *Doom*," he says. "Trying to get 100 per cent on everything and play it on Nightmare, going as quickly as possible because the enemies would respawn. Knowing there was a guy round the corner, you'd actually get a little kick out of that, it would all be a timing thing, and you'd feel it rather than see it at that point because you'd played it so many times."

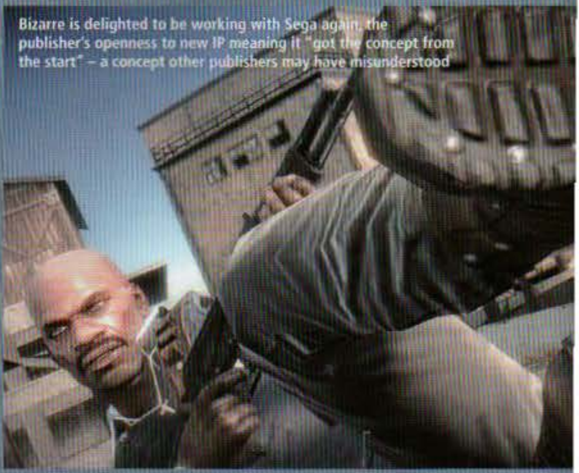
"Well, that's the reason Jet Li and Bruce Lee films look so stylish, it's because they know what's coming next," jokes Davies. He hopes *The Club* will be one of the few games to take the improvised speed-run culture and fully enshrine it in the core of its design. "You can play a game really fast for yourself, like with *Doom*, make your own little minigame. But you weren't pushed to do it by the game, whereas our game actively says: 'I want you to go hell for leather through it'."

The tempo forced by the combo system makes *The Club* a fundamentally, and we imagine satisfyingly, rhythmic game. "The thing with this kind of mechanic is that just taking a few seconds to reload can really affect your score," explains Davies. "So people will reload in the quiet times before they go into a room. You do find it's got this kind of structure to it: sprint, aim mode [the game has a tight, zoomed in, over-the shoulder view on the left trigger], shoot, kill, reload, and you get this metronomic pattern running through all the levels. It gives it a really intense pace."

Just as important as getting the pace and the mechanical basis for the scoring right is getting the scores themselves right – the actual numbers. In the long term, more even than multiplayer, *The Club* is about tables – tables for maps, tables for characters, for weapons, for modes, for the world and above all for friends. "What makes the scoring system is the friends' high score table," says Davies, reasoning that this initial competition is what will suck players deeper into *The Club's* system. But to make it make sense, the scores have to demonstrably and accurately reflect the skill and knowledge of the players, and that there should be a huge, visible difference between the good and the great.

"We looked at pinball when we were looking at scoring ideas," reveals Cavanagh. "We downloaded loads of emulators and looked at all the different pinball scoring systems. They handle big scores really well. You know that person with the dubious three-letter name at the top of the table knows some ins and outs that you don't."

"WE LOOKED AT PINBALL WHEN WE WERE LOOKING AT SCORING IDEAS IT HANDLES BIG SCORES WELL"



Bizarre is delighted to be working with Sega again, the publisher's openness to new IP meaning it "got the concept from the start" – a concept other publishers may have misunderstood



Every character has been adorned with loose items with extremely convincing physical properties to make them more interesting to watch from behind. Cases in point are Dragov's dangling ferrets and Renwick's swinging truncheon, as well as other weaponry







A lot has yet to be revealed about those ins and outs – not just the fine details of the scoring but, crucially, the full range of game modes. The one mode we see, demonstrated in the steel mill and warehouse with Dragov and Renwick respectively, is a straightforward point-to-point sprint: kill as many bad guys as quickly as possible between A and B for a high score. Bizarre has nine more singleplayer modes worked out, of which some seven should make it into the game, but until it's worked out which will be dropped the team is remaining cagey on their exact natures. Some will certainly be against the clock, some 'scenario-based' and some survival modes – we hear dark mutterings of a 'siege mode' at one point. However they turn out, we're promised unique competitive aspects that emphasise the sport in blood-sport.

Cavanagh and Davies are even more tight-lipped about the multiplayer modes. "We've got multiplayer game modes that you won't have seen before," is all Davies will confirm. "The scoring system forms part of some of the game modes, though we do have traditional game modes like deathmatch. We've got team games and free-for-all games and games that make one player feel very special..." Cavanagh readily admits that reproducing a Live-quality online experience on platforms other than 360 is "going to be a challenge", but feels Bizarre's extremely experienced online team – now part of the developer's shared technology studio (see 'Share and share alike'), and including a former European *Quake* champion – is up to the task.

Is there such a thing as a quintessential Bizarre game, we ask? "It's turning out to be the scoring and the competition and the pace of it, isn't it? The intensity. We definitely go for addictive stuff," says Cavanagh. "It's an arcade game that looks like a simulation, and then we add simple concepts," ventures Davies, who's careful, and right, to include *Geometry Wars* and the forthcoming *Boom Boom Rocket* in his definition. "This is what we do. We take something very basic, very simple, but just make it look better and play better. It's a goldmine."

If only it was that simple – but Bizarre does make it look that simple. Even without a hands-on, the thorough, bedded-in solidity, depth and entertainment value of *The Club*'s clash of new-school and old-school shooting is as apparent as its camera-shaking, clean-cut brutality. It seems in excellent shape for a hinted winter release. The real challenge is now Sega's: to take Bizarre's brand of stylish, skilful one-upmanship and sell it into a genre where it is traditionally less at home, aided (or is that abetted?) by an aesthetic and premise that make it look and sound much more conventional than it is. "It's about a fun, action-packed thirdperson game that once you get to a certain level, you say: 'Actually, I can play this game for months and months and get more out of it,'" reasons Davies. "Although it's based on the scoring system, it's not about the scoring system." We're not sure we believe him; but we wouldn't have it any other way.

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE



Bizarre, as part of a reorganisation that currently sees a huge extension being built on its hangar-like office on the outskirts of Liverpool, has recently folded all shared technology – from audio to online infrastructure to ragdoll – into a single group that serves both the *PGR* and *Club* teams, and includes the Live Arcade developments such as *Boom Boom Rocket*. Davies: "We're hopeful that the next games that come out of both studios will be a lot quicker to get off the ground. The start-up is the main thing, we don't have to wait for the technology to catch up with the ideas." And despite the inevitable headaches involved, there is genuine delight at moving onto multiple platforms and away from the racing genre – Bizarre, says Davies, was always conceived as a multi-platform, multi-genre developer, but has often not been so in practice.



Illustration: Simon Danaher



PUSHING GAMING'S BUTTONS

Ten years from now, gaming will be unrecognisable. But what, and who, will change it?

These days, seeing what's around the corner and over the horizon is so key to so many businesses that it's become a career: the futurologist. Of course, there are those who would quibble about whether or not it was a 'real' job; others (Nostradamus among them) about whether or not it was really a new role at all. But either way, there's never been more investment, more interest or more anxiety focused on what happens next. And it's a dangerous business – London, infamously, didn't end up under eight feet of horse manure after a population explosion increased the number of carriages on the road: someone invented the automobile instead. So, over the next eight pages we steer clear of such potential traps, instead mapping out the people, the technological trends and the key issues which will shape the overall development of games. It may not be conclusive, but it should at least be free of manure.



1



1/2 *Brain Training* is the game most associated with the older gamers, but its appeal isn't limited to one generation
3 Mike Krahulik's Penny Arcade alter-ego Jonathan 'Gabe' Gabriel
4/5 This year's *Runescape*-playing teens are the next decades' workforce

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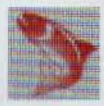
AGEING GAMERS

When CNN recently revisited the story of three boys who beat a homeless man to death and described the experience as reminiscent of the buzz of a violent videogame, it wasn't a surprise that it sparked Penny Arcade's Mike Krahulik into a heartfelt rant about the failings of the children's parents. What was a surprise was that one of his long-time readers turned out to be one boy's de facto stepmother, who wrote back with a tearingly honest account of the family's efforts to deal with the troubled child. It was a watershed moment – the tragic circumstances notwithstanding, because it so clearly demonstrated that the gaming generation is now becoming the parenting generation, the policing generation, the governing generation. It has been a slow process, as the teens who were attracted by gaming's commercial growth in the '70s hit the peak of their responsibilities in their 50s.

But whereas that trend has been a slow shift, what comes next is a steadily increasing torrent. The percentage of teenagers who own a console or game-capable device is growing inexorably close to 100. And so, in a decade, we have an adult society which has truly grown up with gaming, with its culture and its technology. That is not something the industry has experienced before. While it's certainly true that some people wouldn't be comfortable terming many of these occasional, casual players 'gamers', the fact remains that the centre of gravity is about to shift, and the impact of that shift may be the most significant change in the next decade.



Artwork is based on Art. Lebedev Studio's Optimus Keyboard: each of its 114 keys is a 32x32 OLED screen, due – hopefully – for release at the end of the year, for $1,490 (£760)



Red herring #1
In-game advertising



It's been 'about to hit big' for about three years now, and it's becoming clear that although advertising is going to grow gradually more central to gaming, it isn't going to have the explosive impact some predicted – partly because it's still problematic to implement well, and because advertisers are cautious about its benefits



1 The HD-DVD add-on is the clearest demonstration of Microsoft's modular approach to console design
2 Sony is still being coy about the PSP redesign, but there's certainly one coming
3 The slimline PS2 is an ideal machine: slim, quiet, cheap and online-ready
4/5 Put next to the Lite, the original DS looks like little more than a prototype









INCREMENTAL HARDWARE

There's still no fixed gauge of gaming's maturity. Are we in the seventh generation, or the sixth? Should we adopt comics' use of Golden, Silver and Modern Age? Does Phil Harrison's Game 3.0 (see p9) stand a chance of catching on? What's clear, however, is that discriminating between generations is only going to get harder as hardware becomes more modular and improvements more incremental.

For all that most of us are comfortable seeing PS2, Xbox and GameCube as a family, and Wii, 360 and PS3 a new generation, it's harder to predict if there'll be another crop of siblings in another five years. We're becoming more used to hardware revisions – from the late-in-the-day reinventions of the PSOne and PSTwo, to the overdue-from-the-off DS Lite. Microsoft's approach is even more aggressively modular, with the 360's optional and upgradeable hardware, its pragmatic approach to the HD-DVD (and perhaps ultimately Blu-ray) drive, and now confirmation of the 360 Elite (see p26). And, as software becomes as key a component as any of the hardware, firmware revisions may well become as significant as hardware re-releases. A PS3 with Home, expanded backwards compatibility and the ability to record TV, say, would be a very different device from the one which went on sale in March. Nokia, in its efforts to resuscitate the N-Gage brand, is taking it one step further by adopting a pure software platform which can be implemented in a range of handsets. The closeness of the relationship between gaming and technology means that hardware cycles will never truly go away, but it does seem certain that their impact is going to lessen.

People power

For all its multi-million-pound revenues and mass-appeal, the games industry is still a relatively small affair, meaning individuals can still have enormous impact. Here are four key players to keep an eye on in future – see over the page for four more who might not yet be on your radar, or who might have dropped off.

Phil Harrison



It's still hard to take in the full impact of that job title – President, Worldwide Studios. Sony isn't joking when it says its strength is in its software, and as custodian of some of gaming's most important innovations (EyeToy, *SingStar*) and some of its greatest artistic ambitions (*Ico*, *LocoRoco*), Harrison's powers are unrivalled.

Jason Jones



For all the *Gears Of War* fanfare, when you ask 'what will Microsoft do next?' you're still really asking 'what will Bungie do next?' The answer, even in this notoriously collaborative company, is in the hands of co-founder Jason Jones. The question isn't if Xbox will survive if the next project fails, it's where it might go if it triumphs.

Takashi Tezuka



With Nintendo's new approach a proven hit, the question now is what it means for its heritage as the gamer's game company. Takashi Tezuka, having produced *Animal Crossing: Wild World* and *New Super Mario Bros*, seems uniquely able to blend old-school gaming values with new Nintendo appeal – a killer combination.

Gabe Newell



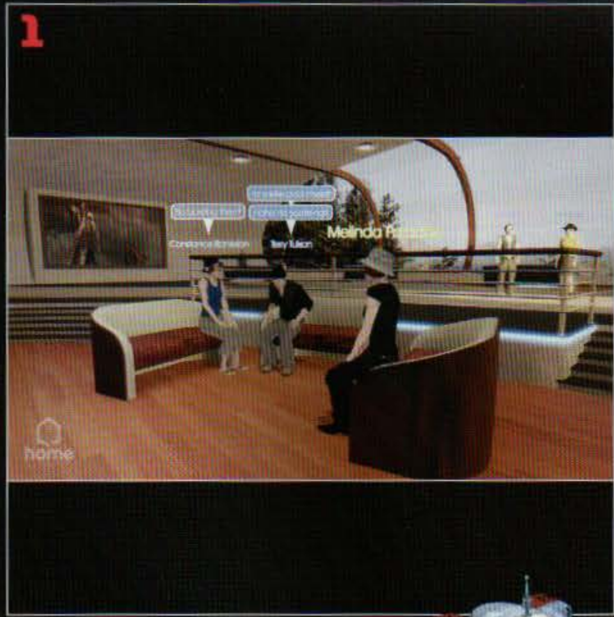
Almost all of the trends on these pages are things Gabe Newell spotted years ago – the resurgence of indie appeal, the value of direct distribution, the viability of episodic development. There's every reason to assume that he'll remain as far ahead of the curve, driving PC gaming as an artform and as an industry.

USER-CREATED CONTENT

The announcement of PS3's Home environment – complete with media streaming, customisable avatars and socialising capabilities – may mark a departure from Sony's resolutely hands-off approach to the online life of its consoles, but it also marks the moment at which gamers cease to be consumers and start to be contributors. While there's little to justify the '*Second Life* in PS3' tag with which it was quickly labelled (*Second Life*'s user freedoms, creative control and independent economy mark it out as a very different proposition), it shows an understanding of how user expectations have changed. From custom soundtracks to editable wallpapers, we now want interaction to start the second the machine powers on, and we want that interaction to reflect more of our lives outside the game.

But expectations have also changed on the other side of the screen. The content creation crisis remains a very real problem (*Final Fantasy XII*'s team mentioned in their GDC post-mortem that the work that went into the game was 70 per cent artwork and only 15 per cent game design), and the idea that games like *Spore*, with their user-created worlds and creatures, can solve that imbalance is likely to be tested to breaking point over coming years. But it won't necessarily stop there: gamers' time and creativity won't just be harvested for asset creation. Projects like Google Image Labeller (based on *The ESP Game*, it uses a simple co-operative online game to improve image tagging) show how corporations can take advantage of tens of thousands of free man hours just by harnessing the power of game mechanics. And game developers themselves can take advantage of the same process: *The Restaurant Game Project*, run by the MIT Media Lab, aims to algorithmically combine the experiences of thousands of gamer volunteers in order to design an entirely new game. You'll be able to judge its success, and the future implications of user-created content, at next year's Independent Game Festival.

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1 PS3's Home may not focus on user-created content, but it represents how user expectations are changing
2/3 *LittleBigPlanet* manages to encourage creativity without sacrificing playability
4 *Spore* remains the standard-bearer for users taking up the game design baton
5 Players of *The Restaurant Game* are effectively developers of its sequel

People power (cont.)

While there's no doubting the impact that familiar names like Moore, Molyneux and Miyamoto will have in the coming years, what about the people who stay out of the headlines, but work at the heart of the industry, pushing new ideas and championing new approaches? Here are four more to watch for in the future.

Chris Hecker



Now working on *Spore* with Will Wright, and best known for his tireless efforts running the Indie Game Jam, Hecker would be enormously valuable for his insightful, outspoken comments even if he wasn't a key visionary, a programming savant, and one of the most widely listened-to people in the industry.

Shinji Mikami



Hardly unknown, but Mikami – singled out from other Seeds co-founders Inaba and Kamiya on the strength of *Resident Evil 4* – has stepped out of the limelight with the creation of the independent studio. The outcome of this experiment to see if creatively-driven gaming can thrive is crucial for the industry as a whole.

Jonathan Blow



The header for his website says it all: 'artful, experimental, expansive games'. A tireless advocate for games to step up their ambitions for the themes they tackle and the interactions they offer, his unreleased but already award-winning time-manipulation game *Braid* (due this year), should prove his points.

Scott Foe



Not a particularly well-known name, and the creator of a not-particularly-well-known game, but Foe's *Pocket Kingdoms* was the only N-Gage title to really define new gaming territory. Now at work on a follow-up project, he's in a unique position to blow apart expectations of mobile gaming, and open up a real new frontier.







1 PSN's *Go! Sudoku* may not set hearts racing, but it's a key title for the new service, and certain to succeed
2 *Puzzle Quest* takes the familiar grind of gem matching and overlays RPG strategy
3 Even patience can go point 'n' click, as *Mystery Solitaire* shows
4 Popcap's *Bookworm Adventures* integrates bosses and special items into its word-search basics

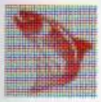


CASUAL SENSIBILITIES

It's already an old gaming truism that the biggest game in the world isn't *Halo* or *Zelda* or *Final Fantasy*, but Windows' *Solitaire* or Nokia's *Snake*. But the next few years will see the weight of that enormous demographic brought to bear. The obvious face of the influx is the Wii, but a similar trend is underway on the other main gaming platforms – as *Bejewelled* and *Sudoku* continue their campaign for world domination across 360 and PS3.

However, this advance is likely to be matched by two contrasting trends. The first is that mainstream games are starting to learn from their casual cousins. The mantra which populist game designers have long relied on – clear visuals, gentle learning curves, short play times and simple mechanics are starting to impinge on game designers ever more aware of how many dedicated gamers drift away from traditional games frustrated and bored. Shorter action sequences, optional level skips, adaptive difficulty and objective reminders which once would have been decried as crutches are now becoming key aspects of modern game design. And the opposite trend is also increasingly apparent, as casual games become more sophisticated in their adoption of more elaborate play mechanics. PopCap's *Bookworm Adventures* and *Mystery Solitaire* blend, respectively, RPG and adventure game mechanics with casual stalwarts wordsearch and patience. Current word-of-mouth darling Infinite Interactive's *Puzzle Quest* (a free PC demo is available, but the game is for PSP and DS) blends a very traditional RPG story structure with a strategy-heavy version of a classic match-three gem-buster. What's clear is that once these two traditions have had more time to experiment with which dynamics and styles mix best, the divisions between casual and hardcore will become indelibly blurred with sophisticated, compelling, accessible and low-maintenance games.





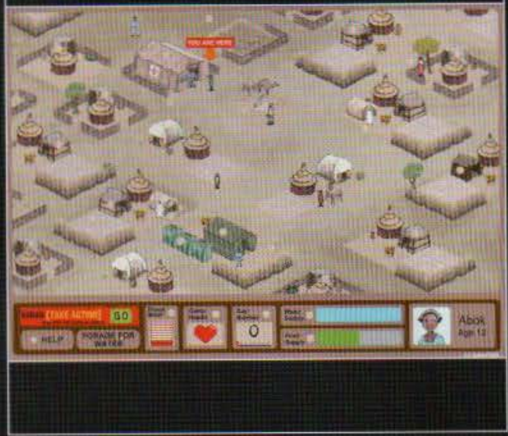
Red herring #2
Hand-to-home



With PS3/PSP, Wii/DS, 360/Windows Mobile, we're in a new era in which home gaming experiences expand into our portable lives. But despite the juicy possibilities, it seems likely that these team-ups won't have all that substantial an impact, instead remaining, for the most part, standalone devices.



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1 *Darfur Is Dying* is painfully rudimentary in some respects, but its subject matter makes it brutally compelling to play
2 *Peacemaker* asks you, using real news footage and situations, to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, working from either side of the divide
3 Training software, like Vstep's naval fire-fighter simulations, is certain to become increasingly commonplace

SERIOUS GAMING

The serious game movement has been blue in the face for so long it's hard to remember it ever looked any different, but it's still too early for it to stop its heated insistence that we should take serious games more seriously. So, how about this? Square Enix takes it seriously enough to have established an entire new partnership to produce educative games. The One Laptop Per Child project, which hopes to ship its first ten million machines this year, sees gaming as the crucial missing link in its software line-up. Surgeons, soldiers and 17-year-old learner drivers are trained through games. Political parties, religious organisations and pressure groups are using them to make their cases. In every walk of life, the idea of games that do more than entertain is about to become an inescapable one.

In some respects, what the rise of serious gaming represents is the real birth of a new medium. Games have been struggling to lose their 'toy' stigma for generations, but the truth is that there's little in the shops today that can't be mapped onto Ralph Baer's original concepts for the Magnavox Odyssey. Although we think of games as a medium, up until now they've only been a part of one. Saying you like games isn't like saying you like books; it's like saying you like novels. Now, the growth of serious games, alongside developments in interactive fiction and art gaming, mean that we're finally getting close to being a real, transparent and0 adaptable medium, which runs the entire gamut from worthy to disposable, lavish to functional, fiction to documentary, entertainment to illumination.



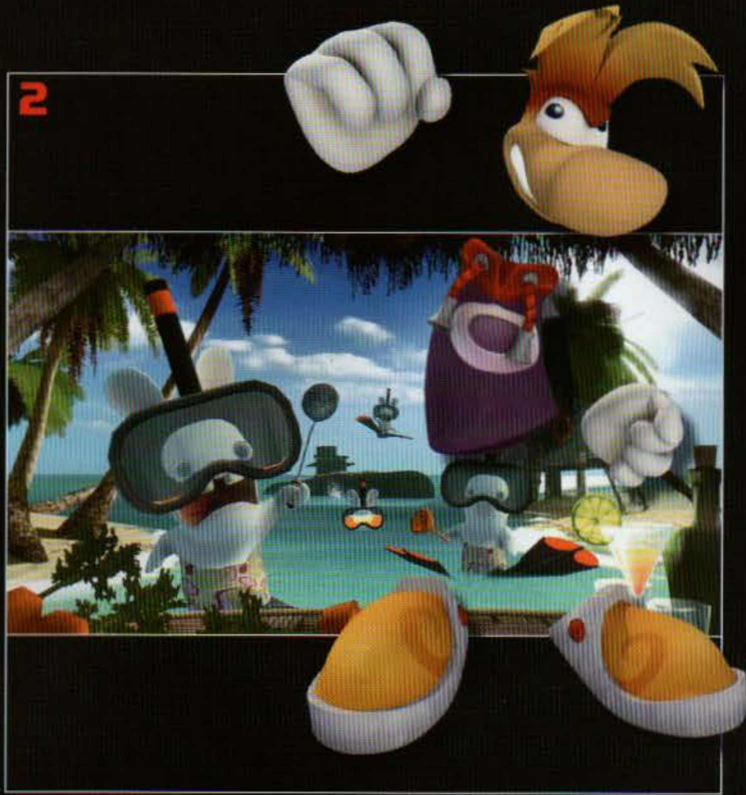
Red herring #3 Mobile gaming



Another perennial 'just wait until next year' offender, mobile gaming is running out of second chances to establish itself. Continual problems with quality control and effective distribution have tainted the enthusiasm of much of its market. There'll be continued growth, but perhaps not the impact once predicted.



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1 *Opera Slinger* may not have been successful at the IGF, but you can't knock a karaoke/platformer cross-over
2 *Rayman Raving Rabbids* remains – for now – a rarity: a mainstream game with a challenging aesthetic
3 Aqua Teen Hunger Force bring their low-rent, high-silliness approach to golf games
4 *And Yet It Moves* is the kind of artful, absorbing indie creation which seems certain to become more prevalent

THE INDIE APPROACH

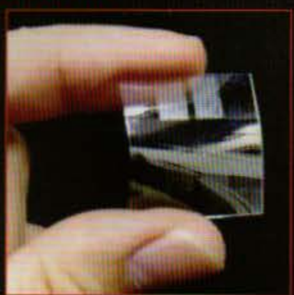
Two years ago, GDC's Game Design Challenge tasked Peter Molyneux, Will Wright and Clint Hocking with designing a game around Emily Dickinson's poetry. Then, it seemed like a wilfully ridiculous idea. But the tide is already turning. While for many years games with pretensions to artistic merit, social significance or aesthetic adventure were destined to sink without trace, the rise of direct distribution and the wider penetration of varied gaming platforms is creating a situation where these more niche titles can flourish.

Those indie sensibilities, represented by games like Introversion's philosophical and ethereal *Darwinia*, currently run peripheral to the main games industry. While they now have a better chance than ever of finding a sound financial footing, the bigger question is if they'll cross-pollinate with massmarket game design. But the signs are encouraging, and coming from surprisingly commercial angles. Alongside the likes of *Katamari Damacy* and *LocoRoco* come bold aesthetic choices like Ubisoft's recent lunatic take on *Rayman*. And, the indie influence isn't just coming from gaming. As the wider world grows increasingly interested in what interactive entertainment has to offer, licences like Adult Swim's iconoclastic cartoon Aqua Teen Hunger Force bring their own fresh thinking (in this case a combat-golf-kart-racer) onto mainstream shelves.

Tech trends

The pace of technical change in gaming can break your neck from year to year, so rather than pick specific devices, here's a guide to four current technologies about to undergo a radical evolution, and – over the page – four incoming inventions with wide-ranging implications for gaming.

Batteries



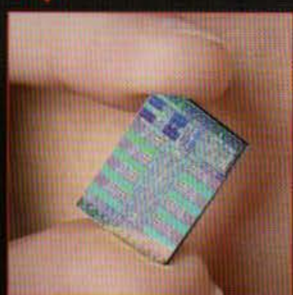
Sounds dull, but a battery is still the restriction around which every gaming handheld is designed. With so many industries dependent on it, there's massive investment in battery research, allowing for higher-performance devices, with smaller form factors and longer playtime – even for transparent, flexible cells (above).

Wifi penetration



The ramp-up has been rapid, but finding a wifi hotspot can still be an expensive game of hit and miss. Once the infrastructure is built, and access plans become more flexible and affordable, all aspects of portable play (online multiplayer, persistent worlds etc), as well as media access and streaming, will be revolutionised.

Chips



For decades, we've relied on improving technology to increase the chip performance while reducing size. But the theoretical limit is approaching, and complications escalating. It means console manufacturers will have to look elsewhere for cost savings over a machine's lifetime, and that multi-core will become the norm.

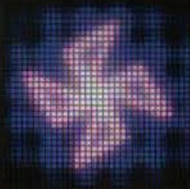
GPS systems



Already becoming commonplace, in a few years time widespread GPS availability will mean we lose forever the concept of being lost. For games, it will finally open up the possibility of location-based gaming, taking its cues from your real-world movements and putting them into the game. *Urban Dead* will never be the same.









DIRECT DISTRIBUTION

Talk to any Live Arcade developer – or, more to the point, any wannabe Live Arcade developer – and there will soon come a point in the conversation when their eyes go glassy, their cheeks develop a flush, and they'll say in a tone of near-religious amazement: "And then there's the conversion rates…" It was early convert PomPom that first spoke out about the radical differential between trying to market an indie game in the wilds of the internet and from within Microsoft's ready-commercialised walled garden. A year or two on, and similar tales are told from those represented on Valve's Steam service. With PlayStation Network joining the fray, there's never been a better time to take your product direct to the consumer. Whether it's a populist online-only product like *Runescape* or *Dofus*, or a breakout hit like *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, direct marketing can be the difference between viability and failure. Nor does it only encourage new development: old projects which are successful within the traditional economic model can also be restored: Turner's GameTap recently became the exclusive outlet for *Myst Online: Uru Live*, a reworking of the original version of *Uru Live*, which struggled to make it out of beta testing in 2003. Without the fervour of the game's fans, and an avenue for direct distribution, it's unlikely *Uru Live* would have been seen as a commercial possibility.

And the impact of this method of distribution only becomes more potent when married with an episodic approach to game releases. Pioneers like the *Bone* adventures have proven that the audience is there for episodic content, if it is well suited to the subject matter. And now, with the rise of aggregators of directly distributed games, like Kongregate and Greg Costykian's Manifesto Games, a secondary industry is growing up to ensure the success of the first.





1 *Darwinia* remains the poster boy for independently produced, aesthetically bold, thematically ambitious gaming
2 *Uru Live* was only able to be reborn through the GameTap download service
3 *Dofus*, and games like *Maple Story*, reach a bigger audience by going direct
4/5 *Bone*, like *Sam & Max*, shows that episodic works best when the content suits being broken up into chunks

Tech trends (cont.)

While it's possible to draw lines forward from existing technologies, gaming is always at its most exciting when it meets completely new interfaces, capabilities and ideas. Here's a few of the more out-there technologies which could well make an impact on game design in the near future.

Multi-touchscreens



The DS has proven how successful touchscreen input can be, but it limits its detection to one point on the screen. Now, new multi-point screens, like the one being researched at New York University (above) are opening up a wealth of new possibilities for both control systems and overall game design concepts.

Mind control



It is, unbelievably, a good few years since scientists proved that a rat brain was capable of flying a plane. But now, commercial projects like Emotiv's Project Epoc (above) are integrating spatial control with emotion detection and facial expression recognition to offer a more plausible take on truly intuitive interfaces.

3D screens



Current examples can still be decidedly ropey (especially those that require special glasses), but as the technology evolves, using new techniques like eye-tracking, there's little doubt that a satisfactory solution can be found. At which point the issue becomes one of game design, rather than of technological innovation.

RFID chips



A horror story for some, there's a very real chance that we're moving toward a future where everything from trainers to teabags, people to passports, is trackable through RFID. Which, at a step, turns the entire world into a prospective game of *Barcode Battler* – which might of course be a horror story for others.



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1 It already seems clear that *Manhunt 2* has made changes to its theme and tone to avoid the controversy of the original
2/3 The increased realism of games like *Project Gotham Racing 3* is raising concerns about their effects on drivers
4 The draw *World Of WarCraft* exerts on its players can prove problematic
5 The unsettling *Rule Of Rose*

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Red herring #4
Motion sensing



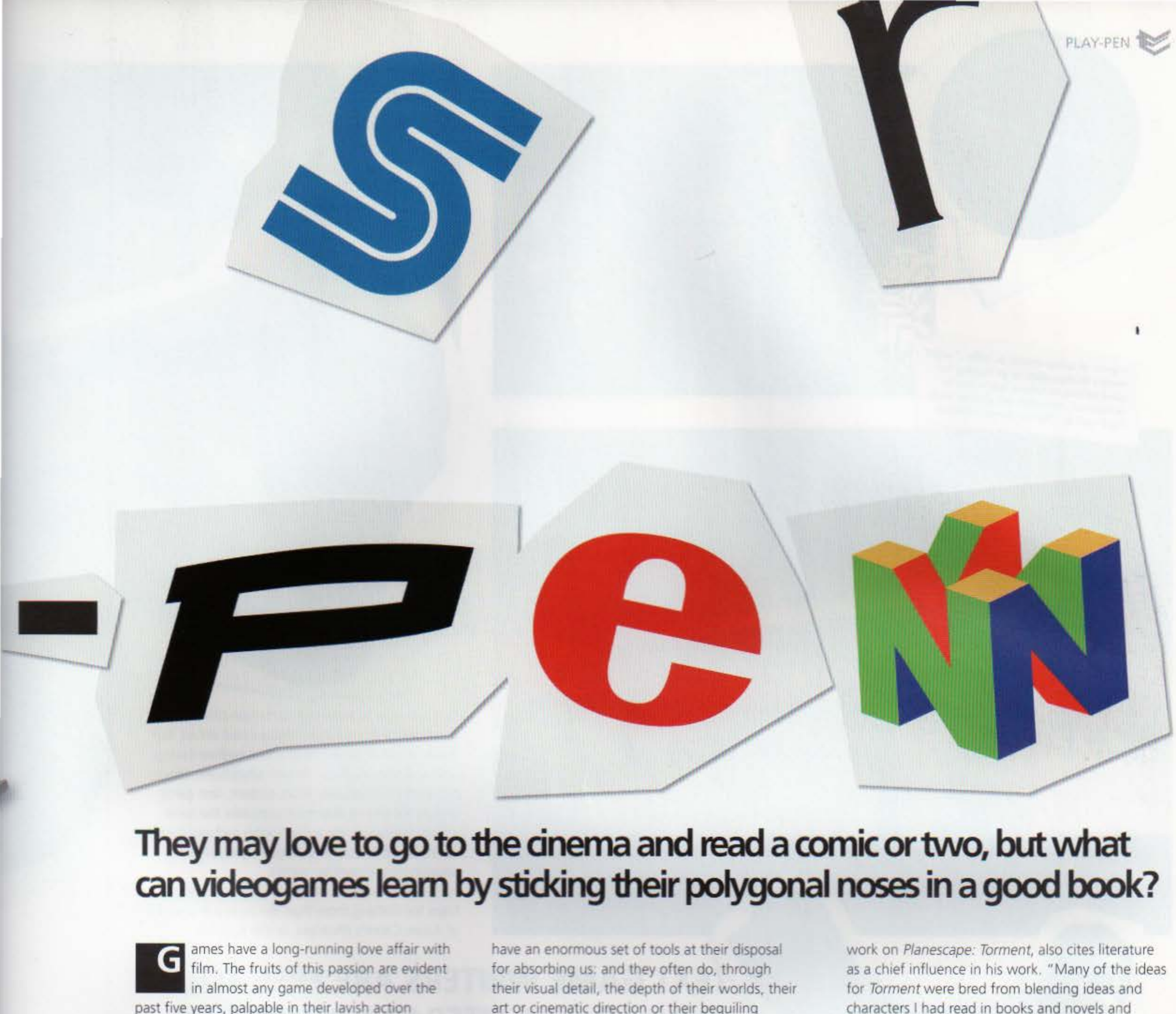
A controversial choice, given the success of Wii and recent arrival of Sixaxis, but the former is proving most use as a pointer, and the latter as a conventional joypad. Is motion sensing here to stay? Definitely. Will it shape the overall future of games? Not likely. Abstract control schemes will always be more flexible.

LEGISLATION

In the UK, we're used to a stable and sensible approach to game ratings, thanks to the early involvement of the BBFC. But, even if the increasingly futile campaigns of Keith Vaz and The Daily Mail don't bite into gaming's freedoms, the situation worldwide isn't so secure. The recent move by the mayor of Rome to ban *Rule Of Rose*, which resulted in the game's withdrawal, was triggered by a wider campaign against mature-content videogames led by European Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini. In Germany, legislation banning the manufacture, sale and even use of violent games was proposed following suggestions that a love of *Counter-Strike* had been one of the motivations behind a school shooting at Emsdetten. And, for much of the last two years, we've been reporting on continually unsuccessful state-level bills in the US aimed at criminalising the sale of mature-rated games to minors.

But, while the industry is largely holding its own against these morality-based attacks, new fronts are opening up. The growth of online gaming has brought much wider awareness of the problems of game addiction, and while research largely shows that gaming is no different from a number of activities which can prove addictive, anecdotal evidence is mounting of the damage games can cause. Another new issue is seen in the findings of a report published in Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, later endorsed by UK driving school BSM, suggesting that players of racing games are more likely to be dangerous drivers. While it's easy to dismiss many of these claims as ill-informed, sensationalist reports, there's no doubt that should governments decide to take sweeping action, the results could be devastating for the games industry: many gambling companies are still reeling from last year's shock US legislation banning the processing of payments to online gambling sites last year, which effectively shut down their industry.


PLAY



They may love to go to the cinema and read a comic or two, but what can videogames learn by sticking their polygonal noses in a good book?

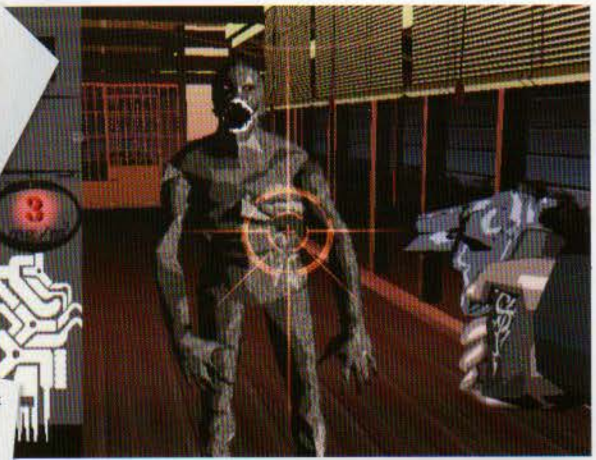
Games have a long-running love affair with film. The fruits of this passion are evident in almost any game developed over the past five years, palpable in their lavish action cutscenes, cinematic set-pieces and increasingly professional voice acting. Ask almost any developer how they derive their inspiration, and a familiar sequence of filmic influences is rolled out; the word 'cinematic' is something to which most modern games aspire. They are homages to everything from noir to western, Romero to Woo.

Those that look to literature for their inspiration are considerably rarer. It makes sense; as a primarily visual medium, videogames have more innately in common with the often glamorous and gory world of cinema than with the quieter introspection and thematically laden, slow-burning plots of serious novels or the considered precision of verse. Look to our history, though, and numerous games exist that have prompted us to cast around for literary compatriots; games whose writers have managed to walk the line between screenplay and novel to create eloquent games that capture our attention as readers, as well as gamers. Games have an enormous set of tools at their disposal for absorbing us: and they often do, through their visual detail, the depth of their worlds, their art or cinematic direction or their beguiling playability; but what of those that absorb us with their articulacy?

Examples, admittedly, are few. Descriptive text is a comparative rarity in modern games, and ill-fitting writing and clunky dialogue are common complaints in even the best-produced contemporary titles. In a film-obsessed industry, developers may yet have much to learn from literature. "Movies and TV are fine as sources of inspiration," posits **Sheldon Pacotti**, who played a pivotal role as a writer on *Deus Ex*, a game that remains one of videogames' most revered examples of quality writing. "But I don't think they can teach you how to construct an experience for others. That process is slow and deliberate, as much a quality of mind as it is anything else. Reading novels is good training for the imagination, for anyone in the entertainment business."

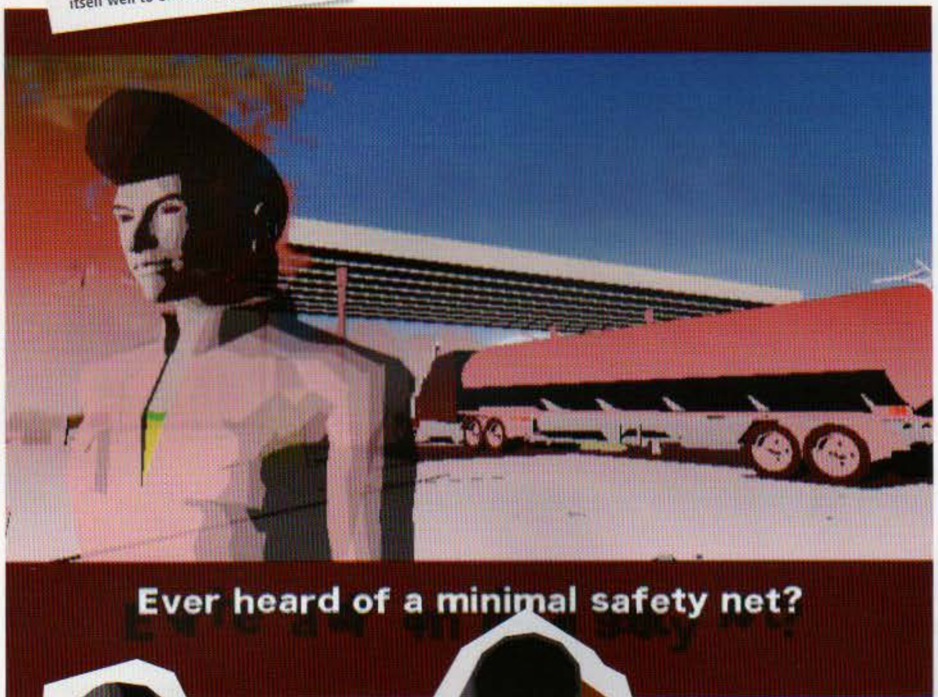
Chris Avellone, a creative director at Obsidian Entertainment who is probably best known for his work on *Planescape: Torment*, also cites literature as a chief influence in his work. "Many of the ideas for *Torment* were bred from blending ideas and characters I had read in books and novels and loved, and they were ideas that could only have been communicated through text, simply because no one would have the budget or resources to fully realise many of these fantasy works through TV or movies," he says. "I think novels and literature have much to offer in taking stories and plotlines beyond the conventional."

The early text adventure, still alive and evolving today as interactive fiction, has a closer relationship with literature than any other form of videogame. "The old text adventures, as pure prose, came pretty close to integrating writing and interactivity into a coherent artform, one closely allied with the novel," suggests Pacotti, although modern interactive fiction has much more in common with literature than *Zork* could ever have aspired to. **Robb Sherwin**, whose text games have won numerous awards, finds the marriage of prose and interactivity enthralling as a writer.



A game as action-centric as *Killer 7* might seem a strange place to go looking for good writing technique, but in fact its convoluted, metaphor-rich plotline lends itself well to effective poetic dialogue







[An interactive fiction writer] is able to digress and tell anecdotes and develop the scenery and backdrops of his games," he says. "I don't know how that power can't be completely intoxicating to authors, and in a perfect world it would pull published writers to the text game medium."

Modern interactive fiction, much more than its technically limited earlier counterparts, displays an incredible range of literary influences, tributes and styles. For Sherwin's part, science fiction is an inspiration, but the greater part of his text adventures' efficacy comes from the unique and anarchic style of his characters' dialogue. "I have been greatly influenced by the late George Alec Effinger," he says. "He was the first guy I read that was able to write science fiction chock-full of characters that I not only deeply cared about, but characters that drove the plot due to their strong wills and personalities." In text adventures, literary influences are naturally more evident; text game writers are free to attempt to emulate the same literary devices as the authors who perhaps inspired them, whether in their dialogue styles, plot development or written motifs.

Gamers in search of an edifying read could hope for nothing more than the surreal eloquence of Adam Cadre's *Photopia*, or the superbly idiosyncratic dialogue of Sherwin's own *Fallacy Of Dawn*. Sherwin cites Stephen Bond's *Rameses* as "the best character study in the history of videogames" – outside the world of the text game, one would be hard pressed to find characters and situations as lovingly and artfully developed and described as they often are in interactive fiction.

TEXT GAME WRITERS ARE FREE TO EMULATE THE LITERARY DEVICES OF THE AUTHORS WHO INSPIRED THEM

However, text games enjoy a luxury not afforded to videogames in any other form; they communicate exclusively through the written word. Without needing to integrate visuals, sound or 3D gameplay, they are free to concentrate wholly upon their writing, and thus are able to achieve a focus that is usually beyond the reach of a medium as multi-disciplinary as videogames. Pacotti relates this coherence to that of books. "The novel, typically







FALLACY OF DAWN

Release: 2001

Writers: Robb Sherwin



As an example of contemporary interactive fiction, *Fallacy Of Dawn* perhaps summarises the evolution of the text adventure more concisely than any of its peers. When text adventures were mainstream games, prose as strong and individualistic as this would have alienated large chunks of its target audience; now, it's largely what makes them worthwhile. *Fallacy Of Dawn* is strongly character-driven, characterised by its effusive dialogue and bewildering variety of obscure references. "I am motivated by the desire to make some sense of the world around me and put events in perspective," says Sherwin (above). "I have always been fascinated with concepts that involve people making it the best they can, trying to fight off external pressures and their own inner demons."

created by one person working exclusively in language, strives for a coherence only occasionally seen in film and almost never in games," he explains. "This coherence – the integration of the smallest details into a single vision – is the basis of good art."

And when we look at games that have impressed us with their writing, it is often this detail and coherence that proves so memorable. Players remember *Fallout*'s stark descriptions of devastated urban wastelands and graphic combat commentary, *Planescape: Torment*'s amazingly sharp, varied dialogue, sheer volume of developed characters and bewildering descriptiveness. Games have the unique privilege of being able to develop their worlds over the course of 20, 30, 50 hours, layering them with description and infusing them and their characters with hidden depth. But they don't believe in characters whose dialogue is incongruous with their situation or their world, and can't enjoy game writing that is so disjointed and mixed in quality and tone that it becomes frustrating to read. It's essential, in game writing, to strive for coherence: to make every line of dialogue and description consistent and believable in the context of the game.

It's a creative ethos that was key to the writing process of *Deus Ex*. "The inhabitants all had elaborate histories behind them, histories which I was more than ready to accept as fact," says Pacotti. "Just as the designers endeavoured to build real-world and realistic places, I tried to make every line of dialogue sound like it was coming from a real person living in those places. *Deus Ex* offered me this vast canvas spanning all strata of society, from drug addicts to scientists to politicians. It was the perfect opportunity to prove to myself that I had that kind of range, so I went deep on practically every character. A random guy on a subway got eight or nine one-liners, scripted to play out like a conversation, and we almost never shared these conversations between instances of the same 3D model. They're different people, right?"

Deus Ex looked more to literature for context and inspiration in its writing than perhaps any of its peers – even the standout PC RPGs of the late '90s, whose literary influences could be incorporated perhaps far more easily into their text-heavy structures. That, more than anything else, might go some way to explaining why *Deus Ex* achieves such a rich sense of context, depth and, most importantly, coherence. The game was littered with philosophical and literary references and texts, all of which managed to remain strikingly relevant, and its characters were positively fizzing with



Suda 51's games combine strong visual style with an equally distinctive writing technique; their bizarre puns and symbolistic dialogue are a key component of their unique design

PLANETSCAPE: TORMENT

Release: 1999

Writers: Chris Avellone (lead)



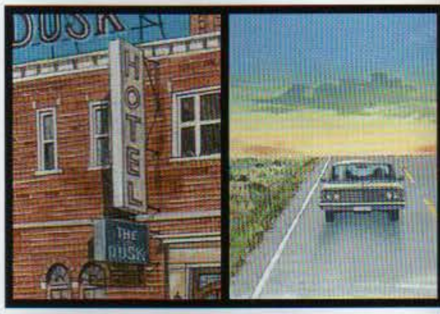
Avellone (above), as lead designer, poured all of his previous experience on games such as *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate* and even *Descent To Undermountain* into the creation of *Planescape: Torment*, yet another of Black Isle and Interplay's many crowning achievements. He is, however, keen to stress that it was not the product of his vision alone. "The writing in *Torment* has gotten a lot of positive feedback from both reviewers and players alike, and I did want to stress that without the *Torment* team, that game would have been much different than it was – a lot of people pushed to make the game far better than I envisioned it, and I am thankful. They deserve as much thanks as anyone else, writers or not."





different dialects, methods of speech and linguistic variety. The writing team's literary influences were as diverse as one would expect. "A lot of the team took inspiration from Stephenson and Gibson, for instance," explains Pacotti. "At the time, I was very interested in voice both as theory, as in Bakhtin, and as a writing technique. I was reading transcripts of juvenile gang members, copying down things I overheard on the bus, trying to learn tricks from dialect-heavy novels like Underworld by Don Delillo or Faulkner. And meanwhile I had this interest in professional and technical languages, being a Pynchon fanatic. I was often reprising Foucault and Levi Strauss, especially when a character waxed philosophical."

Deus Ex was itself an enormous step forwards for the integration of writing with interactivity and, to an extent, cinematic technique. The literarily significant games that directly preceded it – predominantly, Interplay's impressively consistent output of and superbly written, text-centric PC RPGs – had to rely perhaps more on the quality of their writing to flesh out and embellish their settings and gameplay. **Scott Bennie** worked with Black Isle Studios, responsible for the *Fallout* series and *Planescape: Torment*, as a writer on the original *Fallout* game. "Writing was a big deal at Interplay even before I joined the company," he says. "Each generation of Interplay games featured good writing for their times, particularly in our RPGs and adventures. Working in a place where the writing was considered an important factor provided the groundwork for *Fallout*. Compared to companies that did shooters and felt that writing and story got in the way, [the emphasis on writing] was huge."





Hotel Dusk: Room 215 **is a game that most people find themselves playing, and holding, as a novel rather than an adventure – its rudimentary puzzles taking second place to the solidly-written character development**

Such a writing-centric environment, it appears, was massively conducive to the development of games that are now considered literary milestones. Almost every game of the era whose writing was in some way notable, from *Fallout* to *Icewind Dale* to *Baldur's Gate*, involved Black Isle Studios' input. The studio made a point of hiring experienced writers, especially those involved in paper-and-pencil RPGs. Avellone thinks that this was crucial to the studio's success in the area. "If you've done game writing for any length of time, it allows you to avoid common clichés," he says. "I also think a number of Black Isle designers had written long enough to find their 'voice,' which definitely paid off."





Fallout and *Fallout 2* are striking for their frankness and believability. Though the narrative text is usually stark and factual, the character dialogue bristles with personality

It might appear, however, that the best examples of videogame writing are all in the past. Black Isle Studios is long defunct, though many of its staff (Avellone included) have made the transition to Obsidian Entertainment. *Planescape* and *Deus Ex* seem to have no modern counterparts, and though videogame storytelling has continued to progress and develop, writing, in a narrative sense, has become considerably less important as text has become a less integral part of games. And as games rely increasingly on their visuals to get their messages across, we are becoming increasingly conscious of something lacking in their writing and dialogue; next to *Fallout*'s bleak, affecting narration, so many prettier modern settings feel so very empty. Perhaps technical limitations create a greater emphasis upon well-implemented writing in games; perhaps good writing was, to some extent, a product of the era.

Avellone agrees. "Absolutely. In modern-day role-playing games, you can communicate a lot with animations, facial expressions and camera work, but in the 'old days' you had to get away with describing a setting: 'you are inside a small corridor, running north-south', or what someone was doing, rather than showing it," he explains. "A great deal of the text in *Planescape*, for example, describes what the characters look like or what they're doing – narrowing their kaleidoscope eyes, scratching their head with their dirty talons, leering with steel-capped teeth."

PERHAPS TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS CREATE A GREATER EMPHASIS UPON WELL-IMPLEMENTED WRITING IN GAMES

The same descriptiveness is evident in *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, whose strikingly detailed and desolate verbal depictions of settings, characters and actions do much to embellish the grey-and-brown isometric world and the largely faceless sprites that inhabited it. "Chris Taylor's writing for the original *Fallout*, while not the most polished in the industry, did something remarkable," says Bennie. "It made you care, deeply, about people who were only a few moving pixels and sentences of expository text. And if that's not good writing, I don't know what is."

This, lamentably, is a discipline of game writing that has necessarily fallen by the wayside as visuals themselves have become abler to express mood

FALLOUT

Release: 1997
Writers: Scott Bennie, Chris Taylor, Mark O'Green



Fallout was a landmark title in many ways, but it stands out particularly as the only post-apocalyptic game with much sense of believability about its setting or characters. Should the world go to waste, this is probably what it would be like; embittered, desperate, suspicious survivors inhabit close-knit shanty towns or the remains of once-great cities, and power depends on who is able to forage for the most weapons. The whole game was narrated in a small text-box to the left of the screen, adding extra verbal colour to the game's desolate wasteland.



and atmosphere – a regrettable development for gamers who might value florid prose above visual detail. It also leaves us with the question as to what the role of the writer should be in a modern videogame; must modern game creatives now necessarily become screenwriters too?

"As games have evolved, writing has served many functions, not always comfortably," suggests Pacotti, who is currently working on Warren Spector's unannounced projects at Junction Point. "The years when *Deus Ex* was in development might prove to be about the midpoint of a difficult transition of game writing from prose to screenwriting. Just prior to that, game writing often had to compensate for the visual quality of a gameworld, performing a descriptive role reminiscent of text adventure games – but no longer exclusively filling that role. Gradually, the function of writing in games is getting clearer, though enormous problems remain regarding how best to marry writing, visuals, and interactivity."

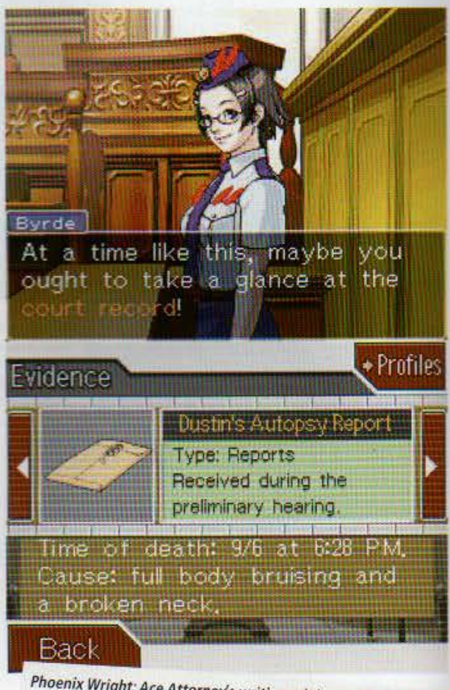
That marriage is proving most problematic for writers in current videogames. Game writers need a key understanding of how their writing contributes to the game plus the role their writing plays within the gameplay, and currently that role is not always clear. "A good game writer has two loves," asserts Bennie. "He or she loves good games, thrilling gameplay, challenging levels. And he loves good writing. The approach to take is not 'how do I turn games into a vehicle for good writing'. The approach to take is 'how do I produce good writing that improves the gameplay?'"

Understanding the role of writing in a game is,

"GOOD GAME DESIGN KNOWS WHEN THE WRITING NEEDS TO BE AS LUSH AS TOLKIEN OR WHEN TO GET OUT OF THE DAMN WAY"

according to Bennie, a skill in itself. "Good game design knows when the writing needs to be as lush as Tolkien or Gene Wolfe, when to be as concise as Ernest Hemmingway or when to get out of the damn way and let the visuals tell the story," he asserts. "It's important to know when you want writing, and when you want the graphics to carry the story. Some games, especially RPGs – notably the *KOTOR*s and the *Torment*s – call for great writing, and it's good to have authors who deliver it. In other games, the writing just makes you want to hit the Escape key and get into the 'real' game,





***Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*'s writing might not be exactly erudite, but its informal, characterful tone is engagingly readable; importantly, it never takes itself too seriously**



PHEONIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY

Release: 2005

Writer: Shu Takumi (creator and director)



You don't play *Phoenix Wright* for its puzzles, nor, particularly, for its story. You play it because its sharp, witty dialogue and occasional descriptive prose is consistently and uniquely entertaining. *Phoenix Wright* is one of the best contemporary examples of excellently implemented writing in a videogame – its verbosity is always appropriate and almost always enjoyable. Along with its DS stablemate, *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, it has begun to develop writing for handheld consoles as an entirely new discipline.



***Deus Ex* is perhaps most significant as a milestone evolution in the art of interactive storytelling, but its literary awareness is also enormously broad**



or scroll to the bottom of the quest list and get the objectives."

Does that, then, mean that technological progress and good game writing, as we understand it, are mutually exclusive? Were the relative visual limitations of *Fallout* and *Torment* necessary to the rich, developed writing that was found within? Bennie believes that, going forward, the game writers of this generation will find their voice. "I think it's cyclical," he says. We tend to go in a development cycle where the graphics and gameplay come first for a while, and then story-development arrives after the programmers have worn away the shiny newness of their toy."

The role that game writers should play is especially relevant now, at a time where graphics and sound are beginning to lose the sheen that once disguised their faults and we are beginning, once again, to seek greater depth and quality in our games' writing. Cinematic and interactive storytelling have progressed enormously over the past ten years, and now is the ideal time to attempt a convergence of these techniques with the consistent, sophisticated dialogue and powerful written techniques that characterised the benchmark achievements in game writing released during the 1990s.

Look closely enough, and we are not without our contemporary examples of perfectly implemented writing in videogames. *Phoenix Wright* may not have the contextual depth of *Torment*, but its witty and individualistic dialogue are enormously entertaining nonetheless, and *Killer 7*, whose visual style is its most obvious distinguishing feature, has a queer poetry





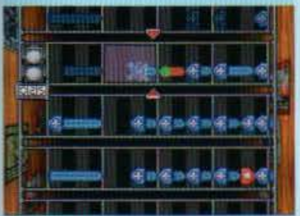
and style to its writing and dialogue that often has just as much impact. *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, meanwhile, sketches its characters in black and white, seemingly with the intention of letting its writing and character development colour them instead. Games' love affair with film is flamboyant and ostentatious, but there is a quieter but still significant love of literature under the skins of many of the videogames industry's most celebrated creations. As games progress further in developing their own unifying creative voice, it is likely that both sources of inspiration will prove equally important.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Daigasso! Band Brothers



It might still be the single best DS game: deep and demanding when solo, never less than hilarious with friends. A western release is a miracle that's still worth hoping for
NINTENDO, DS

Wii Play



It may be shallow, it may be throwaway, but there's still a certain ceremony to be observered when you meet a Wii virgin, and Find Mii is an essential component
NINTENDO, Wii

Crackdown



Obsession is when you're watching a show about Art Deco on an obscure channel and you think: 'I could use those balconies to get on the roof – they're perfect for it'
MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS, 360

New friends and old failings

Or, new failings and old friends



Space Channel 5 is one of the titles that can bring a warm, if slightly deceitful, glow to the hearts of those who loved but lost the DC

There's nothing like scrabbling for plug sockets under the TVs in the **Edge** gaming room, bum in the air and dignity scattered to the winds, to make you hypersensitive to the noise of footsteps passing the door. And even more hypersensitive when they pass, stop, retrace their steps and walk in behind you. A little embarrassing, perhaps, but not an uncommon experience in a room where a 72in TV, a phalanx of PS3s and some alluringly arcane devkits can attract curiosity from passers-by. But what you don't expect is for that person to say, in a tone of wondering adoration, 'Is that... a *Dreamcast*?'

And, when you emerge from the cable snares, the person you don't expect to be standing there is that nice bloke from accounts who's never said anything about gaming, ever. In his hands is a yellowed Japanese Dreamcast, brought out of retirement to play what might be the last game ever made for the system (*Karous*, reviewed on p92). In his eyes is a devoted gleam you just haven't seen since Sega dropped out of the hardware market. Investors everywhere may be glad to hear it, but there just hasn't been a machine like it since, and there may well never be again.

But that zeal remains the hallmark conundrum of the Dreamcast's demise. It's almost impossible these days to find anyone with a bad word to say about the console. Whenever you have a conversation about it, it's an instant game of nostalgia tennis, as you bat the names of dozens of classics back and forth. "Isn't it cute?" someone coos. "I think it's my favourite console ever!" pledges someone else.

And something in the middle of all that stinks. Because however much affection it provokes now, far too many of us didn't think it cute at the time, didn't buy those dozens of classics, didn't consider it a candidate for a favourite. It would make the blood of the then head of Sega, Isao Okawa, boil to hear such loyalty now, when too few had shown any at the time.

It's not to say the affection isn't genuine. And it's not to say the Dreamcast could ever have succeeded. But some of us know that if we'd loved it a little more, a little earlier, we could have changed history for real, instead of painting over it with a nostalgic, misleading gloss.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: GSC GAME WORLD PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E164, E168





The devil's in the details of *Stalker*'s inventory system, its UI efficient but all too often seen. An unforgiving weight restriction means countless trips into Marked One's luggage to swap out guns, sacrifice medikits and gobble sausages

This was always going to be an anomalous experience, less a videogame than an object of fascination. What happens when the arrogance and ambition of an east European developer goes into meltdown, taking with it millions of a leading publisher's dollars? Wonder no more. After five years The Zone, in every sense a wild country born of disaster, is giving up its secrets.

As its name suggests it's an exclusive place, devoid of wit, warmth and interestingly enough women. Thanks to X-Ray, a graphics engine that despite its years makes everything frighteningly real, it's an exquisitely horrid environment in which the wind burns the skin, the sun boils the sky and freak phenomena corrupt the laws of nature. Yet it's populous, busier even than Cyrodiil or City 17, and its citizens' motivation for being there is diverse. Some wish to plunder, others to preserve; scientists come to study, factions seek to monopolise, mercenaries hunt their quarry and Stalkers, the nomadic loners of the game's title, survive in every way they can. The one thing they all have in common is the gun.

For all the talk of ecosystems that react to the time of day or night (the long-vaunted, highly evident 'A-Life' system), *Stalker*'s big cover-up is its strength as a firstperson *shooter*. Its troop AI is better than that of *FEAR*, and environmentally more aware than that of *Far Cry*. Any location at any time can host an unpredictable number of allies, enemies and neutrals, making up an intricate action machine that one fateful moment – a crossed line of sight or the crack of a rifle – can set in motion. And what *Stalker* proves when it comes to AI behaviour is that you don't have to model everything, just enough.



There are plenty of 'keep 'em coming' moments in *Stalker*, The Zone often happy to oblige. For the battle-ready, a hostile stronghold guarantees a deluge of both cannons and fodder

As conducted via mouse and keyboard, health pack and headshot, this is as real as virtual combat gets, with agents free to pursue whichever strategy serves best. They'll wait a small eternity before breaking cover, co-ordinate ambushes and flanking manoeuvres, and best of all retreat deep into often labyrinthine buildings to adopt advantageous, unanticipated positions. Even before a pack of skinless dogs, rabid with radiation, randomly crashes in to send the cogs of the machine flying, it's incredible. As you tap into each region of The Zone, be it industrial facility, toxic scrapheap or underground laboratory, new creatures are unleashed into its whole, the encounters between man and beast becoming ever more chaotic, random and exhilarating.

> It's an exquisitely horrid environment in which the wind burns the skin, the sun boils the sky and freak phenomena corrupt the laws of nature

But if one thing was ever predictable about The Zone it was that the disharmony that makes it unique and exciting would also make it suffer. *Stalker*'s a game in which linear and non-linear, script and emergence are at perpetual loggerheads. That its characters are defined more by uniform than face or personality doesn't matter – you could even argue that it benefits a sense of abject weariness, desolation and tribal dependence. But you realise almost immediately that beyond guns, quirky stat-altering artefacts and cash to spend on more of the same, there's little high-level reward. And beyond whether someone elects to shoot you or say hello to you there's little consequence either.



Not since *Kingpin: Life Of Crime* has a cast of characters been so universally bankrupt. A cloud of scepticism hangs over even the scientists' intents, and your quest for truth is a lonely one









Stalker specialises in startling, fearful tableaux. The pictures it draws of the 'Zone of alienation', with its vehicle graveyards and ghost towns, are truly chilling







Your time in The Zone is defined by what you carry and wear. Weapons will jam mid-clip if used for too long or in ill-suited conditions, and a bad choice of hazard suit will see you either shot full of holes or microwaved







There are several different endings to *Stalker*, all involving a wish-granting monolith that dwells within the Reactor 4 Sarcophagus. Didactic 'false' ones await those who abandon the main quest, which itself wraps things up rather nicely

So the road to the Chernobyl plant, which be warned plays only a modest role in the game's multiple finales and is previously inaccessible, introduces you to the warring factions of Duty and Freedom. They're politically more alike than either would care to admit and full of mutual grievances, but while each offers missions that shift your allegiance back and forth, influencing who attacks you and when as you wander The Zone, that's about as far as your emotional involvement goes.

You can annihilate, for example, almost everyone in Duty's immense compound, stripping it down to a few locals in its weapons-free bar and its prize-fight arena, and your Freedom associates will blithely carry on preaching about its tyranny, doling out their preset tasks like a dwindling deck of cards. You'll later return to the scene of your massacre to find fresh troops standing among the corpses. *Stalker*'s elastic world has a memory for physical objects, it seems – bodies, items and treasures – but little mind for causality or significance.

Worse, when its sandbox credentials have already suffered one monstrous setback – The Zone is now sectioned rather than seamless, replete with chokepoints, natural boundaries and invisible walls – it fails to let you continue playing when the storyline is over. You have to start all over again, inheriting nothing but a heightened awareness of the game's eccentric design, though that does prove a surprisingly strong incentive. As for how good a game exists in spite of all of it all, well, hasn't that always been the question?

You could call *Stalker* idiosyncratic and barely do it justice. And likewise you could judge it by a checklist of one- and two-word criteria and completely miss the point. It's a genuine aberration – a post-catastrophic, organic mutant that's aware of videogame law but unwilling, and perhaps even unable, to abide by it for prolonged periods of time. You can break it and embarrass it, at times exposing it for being the hastily patched-up alpha code it is, but it always snaps cleanly back under GSC's ruthless vision of a mythic nuclear wasteland. PC gamers should therefore see it as their duty, like the Stalkers themselves, to venture in and scavenge for all the brilliance they can find. **[8]**

Reaction test



***Stalker*'s AI is so human when put behind a trigger that you could miss its multiplayer modes out and still feel like you hadn't. But only online do you appreciate the exhaustive breadth of GSC's ambition for this game and the deftness with which the many deathmatch arenas have been integrated into the singleplayer zone, or indeed extracted from it. Likewise the anomalies that electrify, explode and critically irradiate passers-by work well both strategically and as incidental hazards. Similar to *Counter-Strike* in its cash-for-kills marketplace, and like *Soldier Of Fortune* in its realistic arsenal and damage models, it's a strong deathmatch formula applied to enormously complex and considered environments. The lobby is feature-rich and clean, while the Artifact Hunt mode is an enjoyable enough scramble, if something of a novelty.**



COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £50 (360) £35 (PC) RELEASE: MAY 5 (360) OUT NOW (PC) PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA LA) PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E171



NOD's fantatics are truly devastating if used with guile – their one-use-only explosiveness summing up *Command & Conquer*'s fast and loose appeal



Pre-determined obstacles during missions require the use of specific units. This improves as campaign mode progresses, but *Tiberium Wars*' linear structure remains a stumbling block

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars is not a great realtime strategy game. It's difficult to call it a strategy game at all next to modern genre-definers like *Supreme Commander* or *Company Of Heroes*, as *C&C*'s inevitable emphasis on churning out masses of units and launching crude head-on assaults with the enemy is Fisher Price stuff. *Command & Conquer* has its own exciting flavour, however, but disappointingly it's one that *Tiberium Wars* makes little attempt to develop.

C&C 3's Earth has been fractured by the relentless spread of tiberium. This extraterrestrial crystal, which fatally leeches energy from everything it touches, has squeezed humanity into the few untouched corners of the globe, known as Blue Zones, or left them struggling to survive in stricken but survivable Yellow Zones. The Global Defense Initiative (GDI), *C&C*'s superpower conglomerate of nations, protects and controls the blue zones. The Brotherhood of NOD's terrorist forces rule the yellow zones. Until, that is, NOD's enigmatic frontman Kane returns with explosive efficiency, slaughtering the upper echelons of GDI's government in a single strike and ending 17 years of shaky peace.

Tiberium Wars is immediately familiar. The revival of the gloriously cheesy live-action cutscenes, which drive the action between each mission, instil a welcoming nostalgia for veterans, who'll also relish Kane's resurrection. And a sci-fi geek's casting checklist is marked off by recognisable faces: Michael Ironside, Lost's Josh Holloway, Battlestar Galactica's Grace Park and Trisha Helfer along with Billy Dee Williams, aka Lando Calrissian. The scripting is preposterous but the result is effective, bouying along the action with suitably attention-grabbing TV-style drama.

In-mission, the *C&C* template is largely unchanged, save for a number of tactical buttons on the left of the screen – though even these are a nod toward the General's Powers established by *C&C Generals*. Unlocked by advancements along a faction's tech tree, the special actions range from simple reinforcement drops to protective minefield emplacements or the deployment of game-ending superweapons.

What's actually new about *Tiberium Wars* is an ability to set the aggression of individual units, giving them 'stances' such as Guard or Hold Fire. It's also possible to force a unit to retreat in reverse under fire, and so present a more armoured defence to the aggressor. But this doesn't ring true with the hit 'n' run (or hit 'n' keep-hitting-until-something-gives) style of *C&C*'s combat. Especially since the rest of the game is so geared towards faithfully replicating a decade-old formula.

The arrival of deep-space newcomers the Scrin (see 'Alien nation') brings another change to the series, but it's not enough to divert attention from the obsolete and under-developed air that taints *Tiberium Wars*. The traditional build, amass, charge routine works just as successfully here as it's always done. Objectives vary – bust into this base, destroy these powerplants, prevent this nuke from launching – as do the assets initially given to complete them, but each sortie ends in much the same fashion: the tank rush.

> Objectives vary – as do the assets initially given to complete them – but each sortie ends in much the same fashion: the tank rush

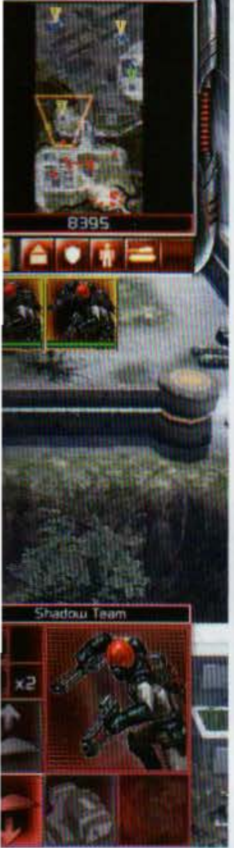
It is possible to pursue more tactical offensives – guiding troops into flanking positions for instance – and practised use of the tactical buttons can keep the momentum of an attack in flow, but there's not much incentive to follow this path. Ultimately, AI commanders are unable to think bigger than throwing out wave after wave of resistance, and so as a consequence the player is forced to spend time reacting, rather than planning elaborate assaults. Battles are won by the tank rush, the tech



The first act in both factions' campaigns begins with The Brotherhood of NOD storming and capturing the White House













C&C's traditional ive-action cutscenes provide the game with its momentum and develop the story, bookending your accomplishments



Garrisoning structures is a vital action that can ensure the success of a mission. Annoyingly, though, extricating troops from their stronghold is a laborious and click-heavy process



Scrin structures share a suitably cold, insectoid, out-of-this-world design that befits alien invaders, and their use of warpgates to bring in troops is a nice touch

tree rush and the overwhelming weight of numbers.

But, then, *Command & Conquer* hasn't ever been too concerned with deeper, tactical play. And as with every other game in the series, *Tiberium Wars* is at its most exhilarating when freed from the demands of strategy and planning. So what's most frustrating about *Tiberium Wars* is that it chooses not to accentuate the breakneck battlefield thrills of *C&C*'s arcade stylings, opting instead to preserve the old blueprint. As a result the clunky, old fashioned switch between combat and management regularly derails a mission's flow. Why is there no button to select the last structure built for ease of placement? Why are units taken out of buildings automatically deselected? Why isn't there a way to begin upgrades without painstakingly hunting down the related structure and laboriously clicking a big button? There are plenty of keyboard shortcuts, but what *Tiberium Wars* really needs is fewer options, not more.

Ideally, *Tiberium Wars* would be a romp of non-stop action from beginning to end, since speed and excitement, not tactics and strategy, forms the heart of *C&C*'s appeal. But too often the action is disrupted by minor irritations – having to squeeze in another power plant or losing a unit in the confusing mish-mash of your base during a crucial phase. Being required to nanny any stationary troops for fear of them idiotically wandering within range of turrets or skipping off through fields of toxic tiberium in pursuit of irrelevant targets is equally exasperating. Setting an entire army's stance to Guard is a way round this, but with such a high turnover of troops it isn't the best fix.

By solving such problems, and focusing on turning *Command & Conquer* into the consistently enjoyable arcade experience that it has the potential to become, *Tiberium Wars* would have been able to really stand apart from rivals like *Company Of Heroes*. It's likely that such a move toward unbridled, heaving destruction would have been welcomed by *C&C*'s rabid fanbase. As it stands, however, *Command & Conquer 3*'s aged approach is instantly eclipsed in the realtime strategy stakes by other, more tactically-astute titles. **[7]**

Alien nation



Hinted as being responsible for tiberium's presence on Earth, new alien faction the Scrin begin invading during the final act of both NOD and GDI campaigns. Their insectoid appearance is pleasingly strange, lending a sense of otherworldliness to any combat situation. Similarly troubling for weary human commanders is that the Scrin forces boast some of the game's most devastating units, from the devilish anti-infantry Buzzers to the towering power of their tripod walkers. Clever use of engineers can see both GDI and NOD take control of downed tripods, however, and this can often turn the balance of a mission. Completing the game unlocks a four-mission Scrin campaign, though the aliens are immediately available in Skirmish mode.



Despite the *SSX3* hangover, *Blur* has been considerably redesigned, its interface and characters drawn in bold strokes and sharp angles. Those who object have the option of turning off the HUD in the game's pause menu







Characters and equipment are the rewards for completing challenges, many of the new skis and snowboards improving one skill yet worsening another by the same small amount





Several of *Blur*'s higher-scoring slopes rely on half-pipes for their biggest air opportunities, the trick being to draw out ever longer and more daring ubertricks while leaving enough time to straighten out and head for the finish line



SSX BLUR

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL)

Having handed out more medals and promotions over the last few years than the world's armed forces combined, it looks like EA has finally got its head around the idea of positive reinforcement. In *SSX Blur* it's created an embodiment of the concept – a game that cheers you on with every fibre of its being without need for those phony rewards.

Not that the icon of EA Big has ever been reticent towards player achievement, literally celebrating it with fireworks during the heyday of *SSX Tricky*. But *Blur* is the smarter and more confident game – a jam session of sight and sound that ebbs and flows rather than spikes. Wii controls aside, its big new feature is the Groove gauge, an actually quite familiar device that keeps the big tricks locked away for when you've built up momentum. But it's a superfluous incentive in a game which has many: fluorescent trails for your sweeping arms, half pipes that open on to stunning views, an ice cream factory of an alpine resort and high-flying beats from collaborator Junkie XL. All that's asked is that you keep moving, keep expressing, and keep having fun. How Iwata would applaud.

Blur uses Wii's Nunchuk and Remote much like EA's other 'boarder, *Skate*, uses 360's pad. The Nunchuk manages ground actions – jumps and carves – while the Remote performs the majority of tricks. The similarity is so great in fact that if you imagine a joypad split in two, with analogue movements mapped on to accelerometers rather than sticks, you've got the picture. In the more traditional genres at least, this could be an excellent blueprint for future Wii control schemes, bringing together the new and familiar while avoiding completely any pat head, rub belly scenarios.

But *Blur* goes further than jumping its one big technical hurdle, and further therefore than almost all of Wii's other thirdparty games. While many of its characters and runs have been pinched from earlier games, it has also embraced its new platform with both arms, becoming a game themed more around movement and flow than ever before. The gestural ubertricks are one example, asking you to almost conduct the game like an orchestra to bring your run to its crescendo. And the interface, where options fill the screen in big radial panes as in *Killer 7*, is super slick. There's simply no break in the game's own momentum, and from the moment it sets off it carries you like a wave.

Are the controls perfect? They're certainly responsive and intuitive, but they also demand more than the average midnight Pringle-eater might care to invest. To slouch is to lose the vital sense of the Nunchuk's range, which can mean catastrophe for precision slalom attempts. And while the ubertrick gestures can be shrunk down enough for a quick draw, there's a limit to what the game will pick up. *Blur* will take you on a fantastic holiday, then, but perhaps not the most relaxing one. **[7]**



A jab of the Remote's A button is all it takes to flip a trick or somersault into a landing while the only recovery from a bail is to give both controllers a violent waggle. Grinds, meanwhile, require the inevitable Nunchuk balancing act

Cliffy 3



Like *SSX3* before it, *Blur* visits three mountain peaks, each with its signposted runs and tournament opportunities. The latter hold the key to unlocking the second and third peaks, while the more incidental contests and challenges award extra characters and equipment. Scattered throughout are tokens for unlocking new gestural moves, which a snowball, flicked using the Remote and aimed automatically, will capture. An instant transport system will take you to any challenge or run from any location, which is a godsend considering how tough the slopes are to navigate when you're flying through their increasingly hazardous terrain. Also returning are Radio BIG and commentator DJ Atomika, showing us once again how such features should actually be done.

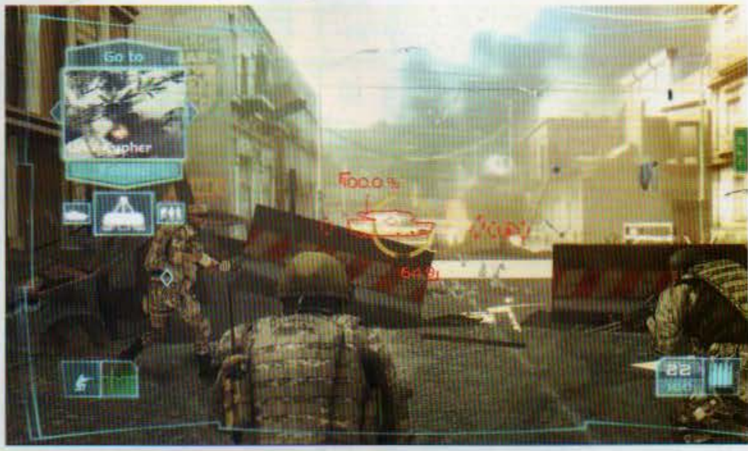


Beneath all of *GRAW 2*'s tactical camouflage lies a straightforward duck (and cover) shoot. As if in recognition of the fact, the on-rails interludes that make you a helicopter gunner revert to the simple target practice and pile on the explosions



TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 (360, PS3) £35 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT PARIS/RED STORM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E173



With three franchises steamrollering the charts on a yearly basis, developed across more studios and boasting more discrete modes and versions than you would think possible, Ubisoft's Tom Clancy operation is an unstoppable entertainment juggernaut. The games' familiarity and ubiquity can be as cold and desensitising as their creepily clinical militarism – enemies are 'threats', killing is 'neutralising' – but given the scale of the undertaking, Ubisoft has to be congratulated for keeping the quality bar as high as it does.

The singleplayer campaign of last year's *Advanced Warfighter* was one of the shakier entries in the log book, and rather than stumble into another headlong clash between deadline and ambition, Ubi's Paris studio has sacrificed change (and length) for polish in this brisk sequel. The game picks up your deniable adventures in the Mexican rebellion mere hours later, with the last-act visit to El Paso hardly counting as a change of scene. The looks and sounds are indistinguishable, but that's hardly a bad thing. The choking dust, glowering skies, ochre light and the tremendous percussive impact of the action remain one of the most persuasive Hollywood visions in games. And this time they're on a much more solid technical foundation.

The design is less rickety, too. The addition of a medic unit, who can heal you as well as your team, goes hand-in-hand with softer difficulty and more regular checkpoints to make this game considerably less frustrating. Unfortunately, the flexible squad composition only works with hindsight and the mobile cover/inventory that is the Mule is only occasionally available, but they're both still welcome relief. New military gadgetry, rendered in gorgeous, fetishistic detail, is showered on you far faster than the scenario can provide excuses to use it, and the AI is still not up to making this more than a hollow, token game of squad tactics. Singleplayer *GRAW 2* is all for show, but what a thumping, brutish show it is.

Red Storm's superb multiplayer game had much less need of an overhaul, of course. Its vast and enduring popularity on Live indicates that fans are in for the long haul and won't need too many excuses to snap up an expansion. An all-new co-op campaign set in Panama, slicker graphics, larger and more involving maps and a smattering of new modes are more than enough, not to mention the greater teamwork incentives of the new aid system (allowing teammates to patch each other up when shot) and the campaign's dynamic objectives. For dedicated Ghosts *GRAW 2* is a no-brainer. For the rest of us it's just the exact game *Advanced Warfighter* should have been and would have been if the clock wasn't watching; Ubisoft rewriting history and charging us twice for the privilege. **[7]**

A hugely improved cross-com allows you to view full-screen camera feeds from all units, including your squad, the Mule, the Cypher spy-bot and support such as APCs, tanks and Mexican regulars. While it can help select targets, the benefit is mostly cosmetic



Much is made of the lighting, shaders and particle effects, and rightly so, but the camera makes a huge contribution to its visual impact. The tight perspective and the 'hand-held' tilt, see-saw and shudder put you right in Scott Mitchell's boots and make up for his blank presence

Unreal politik



It's less true of *Splinter Cell* than *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* these days, but the Clancy games have a studied lack of personality that contrasts with their love of orchestrated cinematic bombast in quite unsettling ways. *GRAW 2* especially borrows everything it can from the narrative arts that will lend excitement and power to its action, but nothing at all that will provide it with context: no coherent story, no recognisably human characters, little dialogue that's not a barked order, and heaven forbid it should tackle the political ramifications of a scenario that echoes so many past US misadventures in Central and South America. It amounts to a conscience-free, glossy advert for black-ops meddling and military superiority for the sake of it that even Hollywood at its most crass would shy away from.



The squad play may be light and the set-pieces ludicrous but, this side of the intimidating likes of *Full Spectrum Warrior*, few games are as good at forcing you to make use of cover or portray the speed and lethal intensity of a fire-fight with as much conviction – not even *Gears Of War*







If you get caught by an enemy destroyer, the silent and slow sinking of your submarine is terrifying to behold, as compartments flood and your crew slowly die. Although there's greater horror in sinking lifeboats filled with men



You can accelerate time up to 8,000 times on the navigation map – though buggy reporting of enemy contacts can force you to drop back down to normal speed on regular occasions



SILENT HUNTER 4: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £35 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE (UBISOFT ROMANIA)

The very definition of narrow but deep, like the oceans it traverses, *Silent Hunter* has moved theatre with each incarnation. As the headline implies, this time round the focus is on the war in the Pacific. Indeed, this is a welcome return to the original *Silent Hunter* as, like that game, you take command of a US submarine right from the strike on Pearl Harbour, performing the glorious task of sinking hundreds of defenceless civilian ships.

Cringeworthy jokes about immersion aside, the submarine simulation is spot-on. A game so narrow should be limited, but the amount of control you have over your boat is enormous. You can personally manipulate every aspect of the ship, from sonar and radar, to periscopes, anti-aircraft and deck guns; you can even stand on the deck and just watch the world go by or take in the Das Boot-style 3D interiors of the ship while the creepy crew go about their duties. There's a sense of ownership as you micro-manage the crew, making sure they sleep, are assigned to the right duties or watch and upgrade the ship at the end of a mission. Moreover, unlike in its somewhat context-free predecessors, *Wolves* constantly updates you about events elsewhere, which brings a wonderful sense of history, though one would be loathe to call it edutainment.

Most of your time will be spent in the campaign mode, but before you can even get into the action you have to plot a course on your navigation map to an area rich in merchant ships. From here you'll be warned of radar contacts, get radio reports of convoys on the move and plot a route that will maximise your chance of intercepting an enemy. Once you have, you'll have at most a couple of minutes of action before you've either sunk your enemy and returned to another slow hunt for more prey or been sunk yourself. No attack feels routine, and the challenges of just getting in position to fire can't be exaggerated, producing unmatchable slow-burning excitement.

For more depth, there is also a range of historical missions and war patrols, giving you a chance to sink yourself into instant action. Then there's a range of multiplayer modes, which let you control Japanese destroyers or join your pals in a wolf pack. For the beginner, the choice isn't so easy. Even on the least realistic setting, the game can be fearsomely complicated and the manual and tutorials are little help.

The game also contains bugs, ranging from inconsistent AI to simple crashes, so patching is essential, and it's a shame that such an accomplished game has been released in this state. **[7]**





The modelling of waves and ship damage has improved greatly, and watching a ship spill its cargo as it sinks is even better, though most of the game is very familiar

Sent reeling



The most fascinating aspects of the *Silent Hunter* series are the reality settings. You can alter your ability to use external cameras, the rate at which resources (O2, fuel, electricity, ammo) run out, and so on. To get close to 100 per cent reality you need to start using compasses, ship identification tables and setting the clockwork gyroscopes in your torpedoes yourself. If you consider yourself a hardcore simulation buff, this is the be all and end all.



KAROUS

FORMAT: DREAMCAST RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: MILESTONE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PRICE: ¥6,090 (£26)

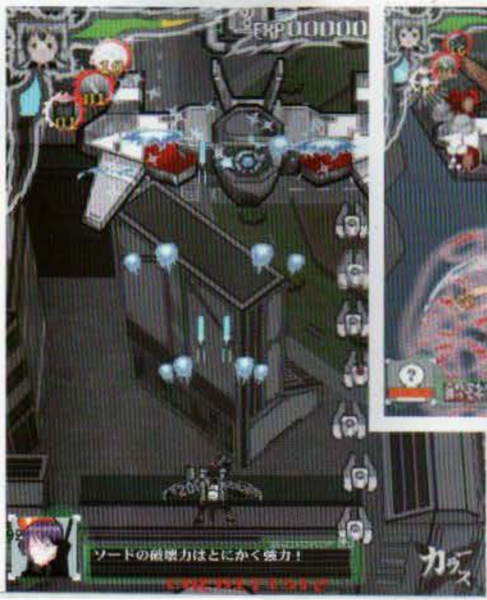
It all feels like the end of an era. Another in the long line of 'last Dreamcast game ever' candidates, *Karous* is a sombre sequel to the effusive energy of *Radirgy*. That status might prove as illusory as before – Triangle Service has just announced that *Exzeal*, a sequel to *Trizeal*, is in development for Naomi, and must be a conceivable candidate for the real last DC game ever – but the sense of things coming to an end persists. Forget never buying a Dreamcast game again – when are you ever going to unwrap another 2D vertical shooter?

But, aside from that sense of significance, what does *Karous* have to offer? A refinement of *Radirgy*'s varied, upgradable weapon system, it equips you with lasers, a sword attack and a shield which auto-engages whenever you aren't firing. These power up through use – laser fire is rewarded with little upgrade tokens which must be collected, and the sword and shield both tally the enemy bullets they absorb – and the selection of which to use when is a matter of both tactical smarts and personal preference. Often, such systems trap you in a cul-de-sac, since if you over-use one weapon initially, the others remain too weak to risk using at later stages, trapping you into relying on your initial choice. *Karous*' smart solution is to let you choose your own power-ups. These special tokens are dropped from particular enemies and, when hit back up the screen with the sword, cycle through a variety of bonuses. So, if your shield is miserably puny, you can juggle your way through half a dozen tokens and buy yourself some free levels. That generosity is seen throughout the game, which is a much gentler challenge than you might expect. Your smart bomb – a red skull sigil which blooms out from your ship and makes you invincible – is charged, and recharged, by the enemy bullets you absorb, meaning that the worse the bullet hell you encounter, the more change you have of chaining specials and sailing through the carnage.

It's a game that betrays its fairly humble origins – there are only a handful of levels and the art-style, though striking, never quite convinces, but it's also a genuinely considerate and free-thinking game. *Karous* may translate as '*Crow*', but it's a fair swansong for the machine famous for cel-shaded beauty, niche appeal and passionate, inventive ideas. **[6]**



Although the game offers the put-your-telly-on-its-side option of Tate mode, most players will be stuck with the heavily letter-boxed, normal display option. The visuals survive the crush well





The muted palette and flat-shading doesn't stop the game becoming a riot of colour – thanks partly to special attacks



MEDAL OF HONOR VANGUARD

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED) Wii PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA LA)









Regenerative health and a centrally placed grenade warning are the more obvious of a host of borrowed elements. Their inclusion has made such a marked difference to the experience that it's likely to see them remain for *Airborne*

Surprisingly open environments and a much more organic approach to level design are among the more immediate pleasantries here, with on the fly mission objectives leading you by the hand from one shooting gallery to the next in a manner that, at least, *feels* less contrived than *Honor* has managed of late. This is a far cry from *Rising Sun* or *European Assault* that so sullied the series' good name – instead it's something altogether more familiar.

Vanguard, is, to all intents and purposes, *Call Of Duty* – and who could blame it, given that its rival has long since taken over standard-bearing duties. A handful of mechanical and cosmetic parallels are backed up by deeper similarities, with missions flowing from star to golden star, objective to objective, triggering the generous checkpoints along the way, and pausing only to bark at you through your commanding officer's scripted theatrics.

The improved skirmishes now feel less like treadmills to endure and more like journeys through which to enjoy the satisfying duck and cover combat. Although still an essentially linear experience, larger maps and arenas now allow for some (small) element of strategy, flanking and, at the very least, a better illusion of choice.

It's reassuring to see *Vanguard* making strides in the right direction, but for all its plucky determination yo can never shake the feeling that it's punching above its weight.

Without the clarity and detail, without the billowing smoke and splintering wood and the sheer weigh of enemy numbers afforded by the current leap in technology, the horror of war become lost. *Vanguard* simply fails to deliver the pomp and bluster o the window dressing so essential in disguising the shortcomings inherent in *Call Of Duty*'s framework.

The result is like playing a hastily assembled prototype – something tha really rings true when you discover, at only four main missions, how stunted the game is. Without a doubt it show promise, which isn't quite enough to make it a great game – but it does go some way to giving hope that the forthcoming *Airborne* may regain a little of the series' honour. **[5**



The parachute drops opening some of the stage (the Market Garden opening is a particular highlight) feel like a test bed for *Airborne*, where choosing your landing zone determines how the opening stages of a level pan out



LOST IN BLUE 2

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MAY
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

While nobody would expect a shipwreck to be the easiest of disasters to survive, you might start counting your blessings if you were to wash up on a sun-drenched tropical island with an abundance of seafood littering its otherwise pristine beaches. Throw in an attractive member of the opposite sex and one cosy little cave dwelling, and you could be forgiven for thinking that worse things can happen at sea.

It doesn't take long for the holiday mood to wear off and the back-breakingly tedious daily grind to begin, however. In fact it only takes about half an hour – just long enough to realise that the few fruits of the forest that don't cause you crippling stomach cramps have about as much nutritional value as the canvas backpack you managed to save from the sinking ship. And shortly afterwards, when you're hit with the somewhat disappointing revelation that your apparently cute partner is lacking enough common sense not to even eat or drink if you forget to tell him or her to – and will actually *drop dead from thirst* if you find yourself a more interesting pastime than leading the dimwit to the river that conveniently runs near the cave – well, that's when you know that every hour of every day is going to be a struggle.



That's the problem with *Lost In Blue 2*. As interesting as exploring the island can be, it's painfully hard to get anywhere without being forced to repeat chores that are just plain boring. Finding out what lies further into the jungle is engaging, but playing repetitive cooking minigames in order to extract calories from what Ray Mears would no doubt recognise as highly nutritious bush tucker is a simply tedious. Marry this with a fiddly control system and you have a game that only the most devoted fans of the original are likely to appreciate. **[5]**



Killing animals is the best way to get a meal that adds more than 10 per cent to your health. The first weapon is a spear, made from a special stick and a magically sharpened stone. It's ideal for skewering fish



HEATSEEKER

FORMAT: Wii, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £40 (Wii) £30 (PS2, PSP) RELEASE: MARCH 30 PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS DEVELOPER: IR GURUS/IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E172



Assigning targets for wingmen is too complicated a task in this company, and is soon an unwelcome distraction from cartwheeling across the sky

This, presumably, is what the marketing arm of the games industry wants you to think of what's now officially the last gen. No online community, teeming worlds or high fidelity: the old days were an endless parade of simplistic objectives, crude explosions and angular smoke clouds, with detail confined to FMV.

It is, of course, an intentional simplicity: solo heroics unsullied by complex controls or depth of purpose. Take to the skies, destroy increasingly numerous foes in air, sea, and land, and return to the terse encouragement of your commanding officer – such is the lot of the faceless codename, and it's not a wholly unpleasant one.

Even something as prosaic as a wired controller can't sap the enjoyment of lunging around the sky loosing fusillades of rockets into a hail of tracer fire. While the objectives are uncomplicated the range and rate at which they're issued piles on the pressure, as new attacks flourish both at the perimeter of the sparse maps and upon closer inspection of the existing inhabitants, while bonus objectives mount in the background.





Although there is a 'realistic' flight model, it's only fractionally more challenging than the arcade. Limitless ammunition and generous armour keep it firmly in the Hollywood camp

It's an experience lifted by neat, if derivative, camera work – with an occasional Bruckheimer-esque flourish adding to the uncomplicated charm – although tracking munitions from barrel to luckless target throws the graphics under a spotlight that would have been better left dimmed.

The most unforgiving gaze, however, is the player's: the arsenal of unlockable planes and weapons, while extensive, isn't big or varied enough to sustain prolonged interest. It'll be happier on PSP, where competitors and attention spans are in short supply, and the more energetic interaction offered by the Wii should play to its drop-in simplicity and haphazard dogfights, but on PS2 it's too obviously anachronistic and quickly exhausted. Which is appropriate enough in the circumstances, but these twilight years should be better spent. **[5]**



AFTER BURNER BLACK FALCON

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: PLANET MOON

Palm pilots



Told through comic-strip cutscenes, dossiers for the game's selectable characters and barely associated mission briefs, *Black Falcon*'s three storylines serve simply to provide the game's locations and bosses with a modicum of context. While there is indeed a squadron of rogue pilots which shares the game's title, flying a number of prototype jets which appear as its bosses, so little time (and talent, it seems) has been set aside for dialogue and backstory that it's absolutely impossible to care. Each story makes its dramatic thrust about two thirds of the way in, tackling such locker room issues as male chauvinism and the perils of ego, at which point you at least come to appreciate that they each hold some potential, albeit for inadvertent comedy.

By recognising *After Burner* as a game of motion rather than detail and sensation rather than scale, Planet Moon (*Infected*) has made a more authentic handheld version than you may have thought possible. It's proved that the classic coin-op's selling point was never the synchronised movements of its flight stick and chair, but rather the *Tempest*-like swing of its F-14 around a single vanishing point, through a tunnel of Sega's finest blue and white.

PSP's kindness towards *Black Falcon*, which most certainly isn't a port of last year's *After Burner Climax* arcade machine, is the big surprise here. Its wide screen commands both attention and focused play, the analogue nub standing in admirably for those unwieldy flight controls. And as the game rolls and pitches like a washing machine drum it never drops a frame, tossing its jagged-edged models and ugly explosions about with enough hypnotic verve to make complaints about their appearance seem pointless.

Its stages – breakneck steeplechases to be survived first and mastered later – are as suited to a gaming handheld as they are to the series' fibre-thin niche. Each has its swarms of oncoming reticules – ground and air targets framed in yellow and blue – and after a brief, perilous second your weapons lock on. The face buttons fire rockets and gun, and roll the plane should someone fire back, while the shoulder buttons provide air brakes for dodging scenery or striking stationary targets, and thrust for beating the clock when objectives demand.

That you're asked to use these twitch techniques in sheer frenzy against the opposition should come as little surprise, and it feels wrong somehow to criticise *Black Falcon* for being, of all things, arcadey. But to compound the fact that you're essentially flying the same mission over and over again, bonus objectives or no, the pool of enemy types and formations here is too small to even suggest that its campaign is any kind of journey. Environments are reused throughout, landmarks throughout the stages themselves, and in a game that's already quite delirious the effect will make your head spin.

Like many a handheld title, *Black Falcon* is a game of loops. Thanks to a fast-flowing in-game currency and a marketplace stocked with jets and basic upgrades, you're encouraged to go back and apply new techniques and firepower to old objectives. But if there's one genuine gripe with the game it's that its frontend does nothing to advertise or service that ability. Missions are listed by title only, the bonus and secret objectives becoming meaningless the second you leave the skies.

To appreciate the game's dilemma, look no further than its multiplayer modes, which have so little room for manoeuvre that they needn't have existed at all. For all the vision that Planet Moon has tried bringing to the *After Burner* format, clearly there's only one type of vision it ultimately caters for: tunnel vision. **[6**





Knocking out squadrons of planes in single combos is key to sustaining both ammo and health between runway stops. The crates that zoom towards you also contain time-slowing pickups that don't always appear at the most useful times





While some planes are worth buying for their firepower or agility, others such as B2 stealth bomber and Blackbird are there more for variety than function, their visual profiles a complete change from the *After Burner* norm



Visual and performance upgrades can be bought for all of the game's fighters, the number of available planes increasing as the game unfolds. There's little in *Black Falcon* that can't be earned in just one or two missions



Bombers come different shapes and sizes, some using EMP blasts to knock out your controls (pictured) and others raining air-to-air missiles down on you from above



THE RED STAR

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TAKE-TWO DEVELOPER: ACCLAIM/XS GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E137







Three characters are selectable, one of whom needs to be unlocked. Nimble female Makita and shaven-headed hulk Kyuzo may seem like thoughtless archetypes, but each offers their own advantages

The Red Star is old school as much as old, a renaissance of the one game that many saw as the phoenix most worth raising out of Acclaim's ashes. Three years on and unmoved in terms of content, this comics-crossover scroller is showing some of that age in the basic build quality of its foregrounds, across stages that pan from side-on to top-down as the fixed camera settles into its own rules of engagement for each section. But the immense engines that often make up its backdrops and the radiance of its colour choices can still hold the gaze when your eyes should instead be focusing on the game's satisfying intermingling of melee and gun combat manoeuvres

It's no minor flattery to say that, at times, the game is Treasure-esque in terms of how its finest boss clashes strike a winning mixture of panic and concentration, via their ponderous but lurid bullet spreads and the crafty configurations of their sub-cannons. And during its drabber stretches, with certain enemy combinations to repeat, it can feel like the pugilism 'n' projectiles combat of a console *Baldur's Gate*, minus the RPG momentum and intricacy.

Less generally, an auspicious opening leads to a lull during the central set of stages, leaving the final levels to wind in the slack and provide a sequence of hypnotic and memorable encounters with the game's most aggressive attack machines. And it's in those middling middle moments that two things become clear – any doldrums are best alleviated by feeling both squeezed and pleased by having a second player join you onscreen, and the sizeable grudge to be had from the lack of checkpoints forcing stages to be restarted entirely upon death. *The Red Star* is more of a red dwarf next to some of the more sharp-witted and unabashed action titles that have landed on PS2 in recent years, but one that's still capable of shining. **[6]**

Landing melee hits on enemies builds up the Protocol bar, a special attack that becomes vital when swarmed. Its efficacy and refill rate can be upgraded with credits earned at the end of stages, as can weapon strength and gun cooling speed





THEME PARK DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA JAPAN)







The small screens of the DS can make the level of detail feel slightly overwhelming, and the crowd mood is often harder to gauge than on the PC

Theme Park DS is the first and last title to be released by EA's troubled Japanese studio, but those hoping for clues to the developer's untapped potential will find very little to go by here. This is an almost direct transfer of Bullfrog's original game, in which most of the care and ingenuity has been spent in ensuring a smooth transition between platforms rather than radically updating an aging classic for a new generation.

And that means there's little on offer to offend fans of the series. The gently reworked interface is extremely successful, ignoring almost all of the DS's buttons and opting directly for stylus input. The mouse-to-stylus transition proves once again that the DS is the sensible port for PC classics. The dual screens allow the game's heavy stats room to breathe, and both movement and item selection is assured and intuitive. The system only breaks down on the rare occasions when the developer has caved in to the familiar need to make more of the DS's novelty features: certain options must now be circled rather than prodded to select them – a change that feels unnecessary and slightly annoying.

The most noticeable new additions to the game are the cartoon advisors who can be selected to guide the player through each level. They're a neat touch, despite a slight lack of character, and serve to clarify some of the more daunting elements of the original game. However, like the addition of new rides based on the national stereotypes of the various worldwide level locations, they also serve to highlight how much of the original game remains unaltered.

For the most part, the business of building your park is the same as it ever was, the pastel charm of the visuals hiding the fact that a complex, and fiercely exacting business sim lurks beneath the candyfloss and rollercoasters. As a comment on the brutal economics of fun, *Theme Park* has lost none of its sting: this is a tasteful translation of an enduring classic, but it remains too cautious to satisfy those looking for innovation. **[6]**



Cutscenes of the rides in motion have gone, but in their place is a suite of wifi options. When it comes to advisors, those hoping for an anime Molyneux to go along with *Sim City DS*'s super-deformed Will Wright will remain disappointed


PlayStation 2
SECOND SIGHT

TIME EXTEND

SECOND SIGHT

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL DESIGN**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **2004**



Free Radical's underappreciated thriller gave you a set of psychic toys, but its writers were playing mind games of their own

Warning: if you've never played *Second Sight* before, and would like to enjoy it to the full one day, don't read on. Plot spoilers come with the territory in Time Extend, but most videogame plots, even the well-crafted and interesting ones, are hard to spoil. They frame the action, maybe spring a surprise halfway through, and thereafter accompany it at a respectful distance on its way to the inevitable furious crescendo of an ending. The game has fully revealed itself long before that, and spoilers are just a kind of coitus interruptus, a mild deflation after which it's easy enough to get back in the saddle.

Not so here. Story and gameplay are as inseparable as form and function in *Second Sight*, and you really can't appreciate the game without an appreciation of how it ends, or rather concludes: with a formidable conceptual twist and in one of the most memorable final levels in recent years. Without its story, it would be just another stealth adventure in a sea of clones, but with it it's that rarest of beasts: a game that really isn't over until it's over. In fact, it hasn't even begun.

Without its story, it would be just another stealth adventure, but with it it's that rarest of beasts: a game that really isn't over until it's over

The clue was in the title all along. Second sight is, according to the OED: "the supposed ability to perceive future or distant events." But it's quite the opposite in the case of amnesiac parapsychology expert Dr John Vattic, who wakes up with what appear to be psychic powers – telekinesis, self-healing, mind control, projection – in a secret research facility. Not long into his confused stumble out of his room, Vattic perceives information about his past in the form of a flashback to six months ago and, conveniently enough for new players, his training exercises for a top-secret military expedition into Russia.

Also on the expedition – to investigate the work of would-be defector and psychic researcher Professor Victor Grienko – was Jayne Wilde: psychic, professional rival and love interest. She's the one who experiences second sight, foreseeing Vattic's crucial role and predicting events before they happen. But Vattic, back in the present, seems to be able to take a second look at his past. In the research facility, he finds records suggesting Jayne died on the expedition. He flashes back to the











SECOND PLAY

It's a testament to how fast games evolve that *Second Sight* feels a little dated to play now, less than three years after its release; and that in less than three years many of its better mechanical elements have already come to be taken for granted. Its excellent system for thirdperson gunplay, for one, which balances aiming finesse with intuitive lock-on and clipped, precise use of cover, has since influenced everything from *Gears Of War* to *Crackdown*. Sadly, the psychic abilities never provide the escape from restart-riddled stealth frustration they should – not like its close contemporary *Chronicles Of Riddick*'s night vision – and the bantamweight physics are already laughable. *Second Sight* was a commercial failure for all the right reasons – an unconventional, unpredictable lead character and a story that can't be summarised on a sticker – but there are encouraging signs that Free Radical can wrap much of what made it interesting in a more marketable package in the forthcoming *Haze*.



Projection (below) also allowed you to possess enemies, a brilliant, total (if temporary) release from the hard constraints of the stealth game







In a fine example of parallel development, *Second Sight*'s psychic thunder was stolen – by a month or so – by *Psi-Ops*, a superior sandbox, but half the tal

infiltration of Grienko's Russian base, but if you succeed in the level, he saves her life. When he returns to the present she's alive in a mental institution, and after escaping the research facility he rescues her.

This pattern repeats several times in the course of the game – references to fellow members of the expedition squad dying and the failure of the mission, subsequently erased by your actions in flashback. Vattic's power over time is the most compelling mystery in the game, more so than the entwined twin threads of the conspiracy, uncovered in parallel in the two timelines: Grienko's experiments on psychic Russian children, and the efforts of the shadowy American National Security Executive to acquire his research and destroy the evidence, bloodily if need be. It's solid enough X-Files pastiche, a little derivative perhaps, but in *Second Sight* it's not the tale that matters but the superlative telling.

That doesn't mean script, voice acting, cutscene direction or digital performers from the top drawer. These are all pretty functional (economical would perhaps be a nicer way of putting it): understated words balanced by the cartoonishly expressive, stylised characters. *Second Sight* is a game after all, and cinematic values take a back seat to telling its story in a game's way, and paying attention to more fundamental aspects of the storyteller's craft, ones ignored by the vast majority of videogames: structure, pacing and motivation.

So the plot's central device and th game's interactive selling point are one and the same: Vattic's psychic powers. The flashback/forward structure naturally breaks the story into novelistic chapters rather than a film's three acts – far more suitable f a game's levels. The well-worn device of amnesia and flashback elegantly explain away the mixture of confusio and stating the obvious that must accompany the tutorial stages of any new game. The story isn't telegraphe in convoluted bursts between interactive passages, but developed naturally in the course of play, through brisk, seconds-long cutscene and details scattered around the gam world: images, files on computers, notes pinned to boards. It's told at a steady rhythm, every checkpoint and level inching you forward, drip-feeding you detail; and the payoff is saved for the very end.

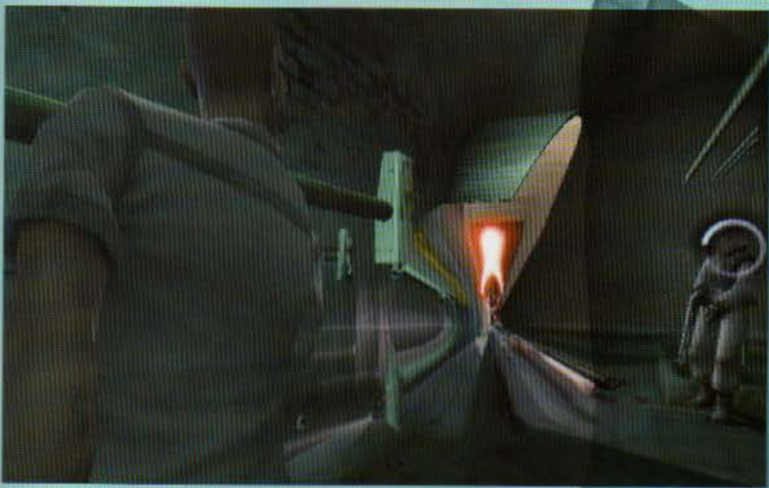
And what a payoff. As Vattic confronts the manipulative Hanson, head of the NSE, towards the end of the game, he is transported – or rather transports himself, having discovered the ability to flash back a will – once more to the past and his final penetration of the bowels of th Russian facility. At that point the



Thin, battered, at once menacing and vulnerable, 'present-day' Vattic (above) makes for an unusual videogame lead even before you consider the bug-eyed, hollow-cheeked art style. Past Vattic's full head of hair, practical clothes and air of idealistic determination make him more approachable, if not necessarily more engaging







Vattic's psychic powers can be fun to experiment with and are illustrated with some seductively clever visual effects (above), but their sense of terrible empowerment sits uncomfortably with *Second Sight*'s general atmosphere of stress and victimisation: this is the stealth game that wants to break cover and show off



game's temporal barriers start to crumble completely. Vattic's consciousness – and the player's place in the game world – starts to flicker back and forth between the research lab from the beginning of the game, the mental hospital, the NSE headquarters from minutes previously and the dungeon-like corridors of the 'flashback'. Events are witnessed and replayed from new perspectives and key characters fade out like ghosts. It becomes clear that the past isn't the past at all, it's the present, and the game's frame of reference flips like a coin. The amnesiac Vattic's quest for truth, where the game began, was a precognition, a 'possible future' after the Russian expedition failed and he was captured. It was the manifestation of his final power: second sight.

The story is told at a steady rhythm, every checkpoint and level inching you forward, drip-feeding you detail; the payoff saved for the end

In a way it's a purely semantic change – you're not changing the past, but the future; now is then and then is now – the storytelling equivalent of a conjuror's trick. But such an elegant trick, handled with such nuance, and so perfect for the videogame form. Once it's all explained, you see that the Russian sections have been the true game, not just interactive backstory, and the US ones a mere playable frame for it. You expected the former to be heading for disaster and the latter for triumph, but the reverse is true.

Their subtle divergence in tone is a clue to their true natures. In Russia, Vattic is clean-cut and optimistic, a conventional game hero doing conventional game hero things (like sniping soldiers in a snowstorm, because what could be a more conventional videogame fantasy than the James Bond wish-fulfilment of *GoldenEye*? Surely a deliberate quote, considering Free Radical's founders were members of that Rare team.) In the US, he is confused, haggard and angry, and the game takes on a dark and unsettling mood – as nervy as that strange title sequence showing Vattic tapping his foot at a computer. His psychic powers encourage you to play with cruel omnipotence and kill more than you need, something Hanson cleverly exploits to question his/your motivation towards the end of the game.

There's more. If Vattic's regular psychic powers provide *Second Sight* with the mood and mechanics of its gameplay, the way his precognitive visions are handled encapsulates gameplay's very nature; and they resolve, with a neat flourish, the age-old tension between narrative and interaction.

It's a curious fact that in many games, especially but not exclusively story-driven ones, your sense of control over what happens on-screen is trapped in an awkward and contradictory embrace with a sense of powerlessness, a lack of influence over events. What will happen will happen, and it's your job to stick as close to the script as possible and trigger the next predestined event. To fail is to rupture the narrative, break it irredeemably, step out of it and start again. What *Second Sight* does, without really revoking that model, is provide a beautifully simple contextual reasoning for it.

Failure is, at last, consistent with the story – because if you fail your mission in Russia in the 'past', the whole premise of the game as it was at the beginning comes true – something Free Radical recognises in the post-mortem cutscenes that put Vattic where he began, in an interrogation cell with Hanson. If you fail in the US in the 'future', well, that's a fair and fitting ending of that story. If you succeed in the final level and kill Hanson, the whole thing never happened.

For once, here is a game which could not possibly have had a sequel, even if it had been successful (and it wasn't, not by a long chalk). It is so perfectly conceived and self-contained that, once finished, it vanishes in a puff of logic, to paraphrase Douglas Adams. *Second Sight* is a flawed game, but an unrepeatable one and in a form obsessed with and ruled by repetition, that makes it a minor treasure.





Second Sight was recently joined by *Crackdown* in including that unusual, contradictory but still very satisfying item – a lock-on sniper rifle (above)


GHOSTBUS
GHOSTBUSTE
IF THERE'S SOMETH

TERS



THE MAKING OF...
GHOSTBUSTERS

It could easily have been a shooter or platformer, so how did this movie licence become a business sim?

FORMAT: **COMMODORE 64** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1984**

In mid-January, less than ten minutes of videogame footage appeared on YouTube and set the internet aflutter. The handful of clips in question seemed to suggest that a new Ghostbusters game was in development for the Xbox 360 and, within a few hours, everybody was talking about it. As concrete details slowly started to emerge, a strange pict ure took shape: ZootFly, a small Slovenian development house, admitted that it was responsible for the footage, that it came from a short prototype it had running, and that it didn't actually own the IP rights to the licence. Despite such a shaky bargaining position, ZootFly had understood one thing perfectly: the lasting appeal of the right game licence.

And the right licence, in this case, is something of a rarity: one that's milked too rarely rather than too often. Even though Ghostbusters has the right mix of driving and shooting to fill any sandbox, even though the film itself is nowhere near as divisive as a Star Wars or a Superman, even though Bill Murray's face represents the holy grail for texture artists everywhere, games based on the film and its sequel can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Isn't that slightly spooky?

The reason for this may be simple: the first *Ghostbusters* game was dauntingly good. That's not to say Activision's Commodore 64 title followed the path many would have expected: though players could lay traps and fire proton guns, drive Ecto 1 and scamper between the giant feet of the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man, the core of the gameplay was a business simulation with a heavy emphasis on strategy. Rather than letting you control one of the movie's Ghostbusters, the game let you actually become a Ghostbuster more directly – by setting up your own franchise, stocking up with equipment and despatching teams around the city to catch spooks and make money.

Crucially, for a game with so many parts – driving, simple resource management, shooting and trapping ghosts – the pieces snapped together well, and the money-making, business-upgrading elements gave the game a lasting replayability. Activision's *Ghostbusters* is polished, intelligently-paced, and suggests a measured and meticulous development approach: something which wasn't the case at all.

"A typical C64 game took nine months from start to finish," laughs **David Crane**, the game's designer. "*Ghostbusters* took six weeks!" Crane is one of the most prolific developers of the early

STRANGE



videogame era. Creating titles such as *Little Computer People* and *Pitfall* made him Activision's star programmer – an intelligent and creative hit-maker whose most left-field ideas still struck gold. "I had just finished *Pitfall II* when we decided that the Commodore 64 had sold enough units to be a good target for thirdparty games," says Crane. "Tom Lopez at Activision came to me with the idea of doing a game around the Ghostbusters movie. Tom had heard of the project and, predicting its success, he had negotiated a licence from the studio. It's common for videogame companies to look at scripts for films in development and try to decide if they would make a good game. In this case, Tom thought it would be big, but he first brought the idea to the design team to see what we might do with it."

With the film still in production at this stage, Crane would have to come up with a design concept working directly from Ramis and Aykroyd's original screenplay. "We started the game before the movie came out. As it happened, I did get to see the completed film before finishing the game, and may have tweaked it a bit. But most of the work came before the release of the film."

And it was the film's impending release that meant that Crane had to work so quickly. "You have to bring out a game tie-in while the film is still hot," explains Crane. "And we had a very late entry into the Ghostbusters franchise. The film would be out soon and if it wasn't a huge hit, it could be in and out of the theatres in mere weeks. So when we considered this project, we knew that we needed a great concept that could be completed in record time."

"If you want to design a game around a licence, the best strategy is to design an original game that would stand alone even without the licence"



Customisation – better cars and more expensive equipment – provided the hook for replays, although the sports car was the fastest vehicle available, it never really felt right without Ecto 1

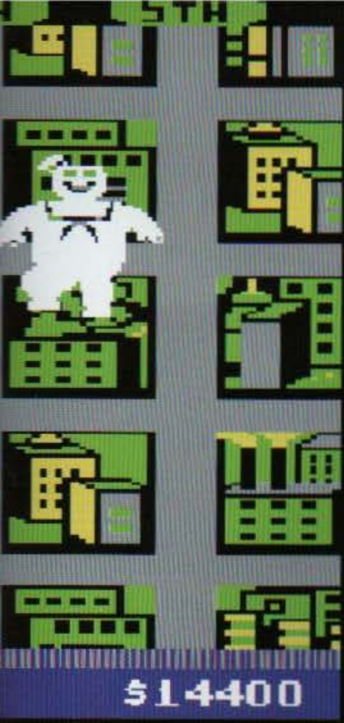
Two things made that possible. The first was the changing nature of the videogame development process in 1984, pioneered partly by companies, like Activision itself, which were starting to take game design seriously. "In the early days of videogames, the designer did everything: the concept, the art, the programming, the sound effects development. But by the time I was programming *Ghostbusters*, larger game design teams had developed. The art for the *Ghostbusters* game was developed by Hilary Mills, the sound effects and music were developed by Russell Lieblich and the intro sequence was done by Activision's East Coast team of Garry Kitchen, Dan Kitchen and Alex DeMeo. The *Ghostbusters* game was a team effort."

But a team wasn't enough on its own – it also required a head start. Happily, at the time the licence came his way, Crane had been hard at work on a game called *Car Wars*. It was this title that would help Crane crystallise the unusual design concept for *Ghostbusters*. "In *Car Wars* you customised a car with weapons that you would use while driving around the city. Sound at all familiar?" laughs Crane. "There was no hope of finishing a new game in time without using work already in progress, so I had to tie the driving sequence to the Ghostbusters concept. And what better way than to change the weaponry on the car to ghost-catching tools. Of course, at no point in the film do the actors drive through the city vacuuming up ghosts, but why not? Let's add a 'ghost vacuum' to the car and suck up wandering ghosts."

With *Car Wars* as the basis, the other pieces started to fall into place. From a map screen, the Ghostbusters would be dispatched to jobs around New York, catching the ghosts both en route in the car and at various locations on foot: the business sim was born.

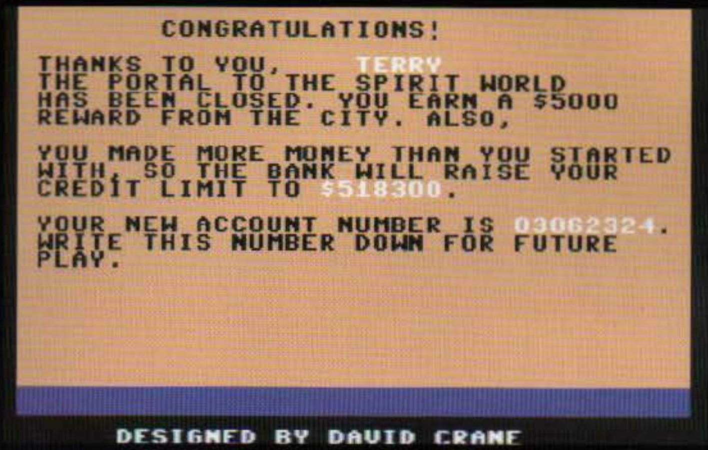
It was an ambitious number of features to cram into such a small timeframe. "As we worked on the game, it became clear that the movie was going to be a big hit, so everybody worked extra hard on making it happen," explains Crane. But the technology still imposed severe limitations. "On all of the

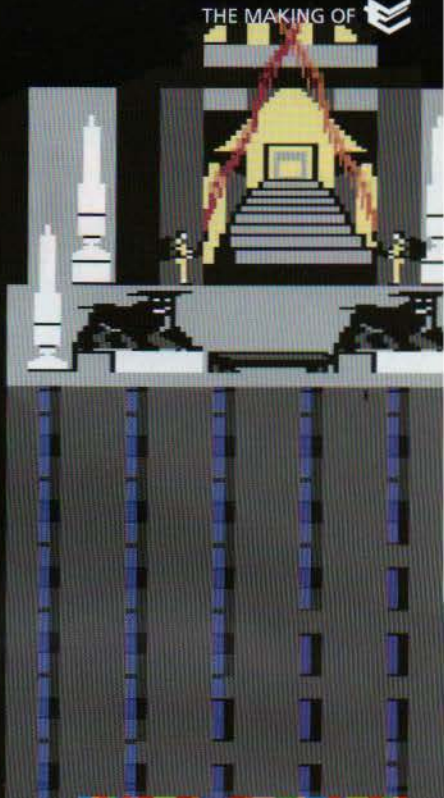






Marshmallow Man attacks were likely to induce panic – destroying part of the city and using up your precious finances. Dropping ghost bait too early left you wide open to disaster as he lurched toward you





early game systems, half of the programmer's time was spent making the game system display your game. We were still developing the tools for the C64, including making custom compression algorithms to try to fit as much as possible in the game." It was such limitations that would lead to Crane's only real regret about the title: "I was generally pretty pleased with the game, but I have to admit that I had hoped to make a better victory sequence. You eventually cross the streams to close the dimensional portal: that was the goal of the entire game. Sadly, when you do so there is only a small animation of a closing door. Big deal!"

Such disappointments aside, the game was successfully completed in time for the film's release, and provided a perfect complement to the movie, exploring the film's possibility space without simply restating the plot. And although its ambitious features and blend of genres meant it had the potential to confuse audiences, *Ghostbusters* went on to be Activision's most ported game. "We used to joke that it would end up getting ported to digital watches before its popularity faded," remembers Crane. He had already moved to better quarters on campus by the time the game was released, and wasn't available to work on the many translations, which may explain their patchy nature. While most stick to his basic template, elements come and go: the Sega Master System version adds an on-foot shooting gallery section inside Spook Central, but ditches the graceful animations of the original, and the NES version features a totally different endgame, but has graphics so primitive it becomes hard to follow most of what's going on.

Crane puts the finished game's success down to understanding the limitations of games, and specifically the way they differ from films. "The game itself was not a comedy, it was a two-part adventure game. With the title sequence, music, bouncing ball, and 'Ghostbusters!' call we captured a lot of the fun from the film, but I can't imagine trying to capture the tremendous comedic interplay between the cast." Instead, Crane played to the strength of computer games themselves. "First, if you want to design a game around a licence, you have to be very careful. The best strategy is to design an original game that would stand alone even without the licence. Our original theory was that a licensed game should be a great game first, and a licensed game second. The success of the *Ghostbusters* game reinforced our belief – that was clearly the right way to go."



HE SLIMED ME

***Ghostbusters* remains, along with *Impossible Mission*, responsible for some of the most memorable sampled speech in early videogames. Along with cries of "He slimed me," the game also began with a strangely menacing voice intoning the title and laughing. "The game's title sequence with the music, the lyrics, and the ball bouncing over them came to me all together as a completed vision," says Crane. "But while programming the main game I had no time to implement it. Fortunately, the guys in our East Coast division thought it was a cool idea and made it happen. It all came together at the end of the project – if it hadn't worked out the whole sequence would have been left out of the game."**



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Realtime Worlds ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 144

KEY STAFF: Dave Jones – CEO, Tony Harman – commercial director, Ian Hetherington – chairman, Colin Macdonald – studio manager



URL: www.realtimeworlds.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Crackdown







RTW's *Crackdown* (top) is to be supplemented by downloadable content, while urban MMO *APB* (above) is in development

realtime worlds



LOCATION:
Dundee, Scotland;
Seoul, Korea;
Boulder, USA

CURRENT PROJECTS:
APB, Crackdown DLC



ABOUT THE STUDIO

"At RTW, we pride ourselves on our ability to find and retain excellent people. This is possible thanks to the stability afforded by a team of directors that includes a previous MD of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, a previous director of Nintendo of America and the creator of franchises such as *Lemmings* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Realtime Worlds believes its hand-picked team has unparalleled skill and creativity.

"We maintain a design-driven approach to our games as seen in the recent launch of the million plus selling, and critically acclaimed, *Crackdown*. We have invested heavily in cutting-edge content-creation tools; radically reducing the pain of the ever-burgeoning content creation process, while allowing our art and audio teams to focus on what really demands their skills. We've also chosen to invest in the right technologies, such as Unreal Engine 3, while adopting best-practice development processes, to ensure we have the best work-life balance possible.

"On top of all that we have forged alliances with our current partners (Microsoft, and Korean MMOG publisher Webzen). They wholeheartedly share our vision for the games we're crafting and have the financial clout to ensure they're properly supported.

"The company has also received some of the largest funding in the history of electronic entertainment via investment company New Enterprise Associates ($31 million, or £16 million)."

University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Oxford Brookes University

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 19,000 (with over 700 in computer science)

URL: www.brookes.ac.uk or http://cms.brookes.ac.uk/computing/computervision

CONTACT: +44 (0)1865 484848 or query@brookes.ac.uk

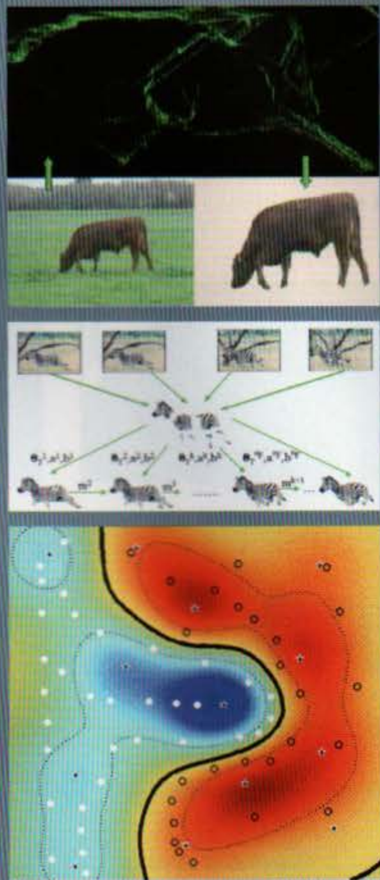


KEY STAFF

Prof Phil Torr, professor in computer vision and machine learning
Prof David Duce, professor in computing

KEY ALUMNI

Andrew Grant, Deep Computing, IBM
Matt Rank, systems manager at Audiomotion



Students at Oxford Brookes are currently exploring and researching human motion, hand tracking and object and face recognition, as well as analysing the speckle patterns that are found on birds' eggs

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY



LOCATION:
Oxford, UK

COURSES OFFERED:

BSc (Hons) computer networks and multimedia systems
MSc/PGDip digital media production
BSc (Hons)/BA (Hons) intelligent systems
BSc (Hons) media technology
BSc (Hons) multimedia production
BSc (Hons)/BA (Hons) multimedia systems
MSc/PGDip/PGCert web technologies

INSIDE VIEW – JOHN RIHAN

"I have just started the second year of a computer vision PhD as a CASE studentship with Sony Computer Entertainment Europe Limited at Oxford Brookes University, and I am really enjoying the experience, both at the university and with SCEE.

"The aim of the studentship is to give my research a real industrial context so that the problems being solved are of direct relevance to those being faced by the developers at the company.

"I study at the university and keep in close contact with SCEE through email and regular visits to the London Studio. Through these visits I have met the developers of *EyeToy: Kinetic* (SCEE's interactive home fitness product) which has enabled me to gain a good understanding of the games being developed.

"Recently I had the opportunity to work in the London Studio for four weeks over the Christmas period. This was an invaluable experience as it gave me an insight into how the R&D team and the game developers interact to produce game prototypes. It also allowed me to become familiar with the hardware that my algorithms will be used on.

"In just one year I have learned a great deal about both the commercial and academic sides of research. I look forward to seeing what the next two years of research will bring!"



Making the right moves

The next challenge for developers is improving the quality of their character animation. Good thing middleware companies are here to help

Considering the scale of the Game Developers Conference, it would be foolish to try and pin down the event to a single trend. In 2007, for example, everything from games becoming communities, to the pressures of recruitment, or the power of games to change the world (see the One Laptop Per Child or OneBigGame initiatives) could be cited.

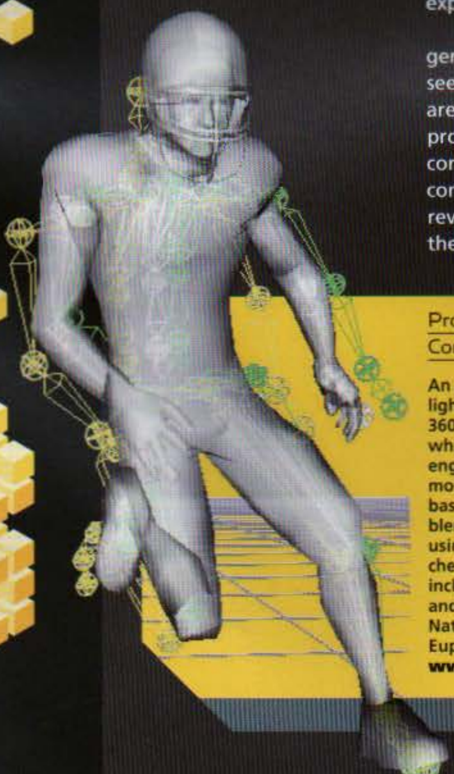
Even boiling the subject matter down to tools and middleware, there were plenty of themes: how about the re-emergence of motion capture, two companies hawking mind control technology, or Google's debut on the expo floor?

But more subtle than these, the general area of character animation seemed to be one that many companies are now thinking about. Partly, the problem seems to be that, having completed their first games in this console generation, developers have reviewed their work and, while deciding their graphics were up to scratch, have concluded that the problem with character believability is in the quality of their animations. In conjunction with this, middleware companies such as NaturalMotion, Havok, Autodesk and Softimage are also bringing their own approaches into play.

At GDC, the issue was best encapsulated in EA's talk on 'Intelligent Believable Characters'. "The quality of motion has to be better than the quality of modelling or you get the Uncanny Valley," pointed out **Henry LaBounta**, chief visual officer for EA Sports, who before working in games was a visual effects supervisor at PDI/Dreamworks on films such as Minority Report.

Of course, believable animation is vitally important to the EA Sports brand. That's the reason, in conjunction with tools company Autodesk, it's spent over two years and millions of dollars developing the in-house ANT animation technology, that as well as being applied to all sports titles will be made available throughout EA's game production.

"The quality of motion has to be better than the quality of modelling or you get the Uncanny Valley"

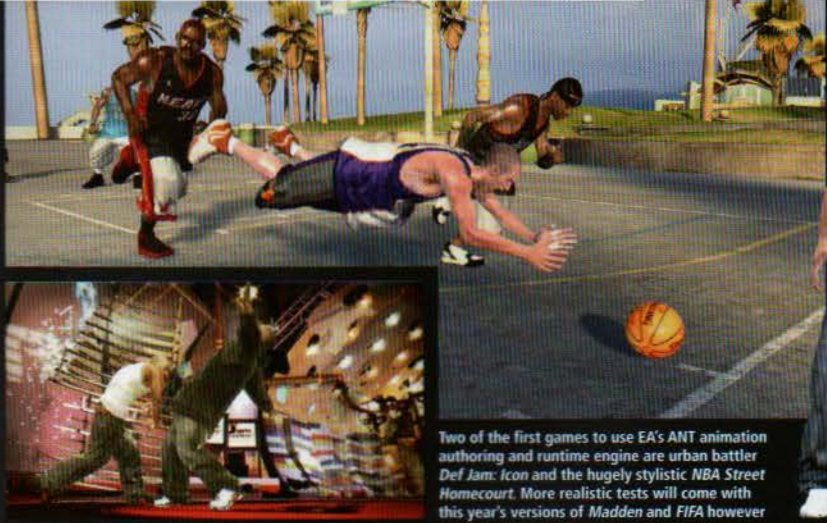


Product:	**Morpheme**
Company:	**NaturalMotion**

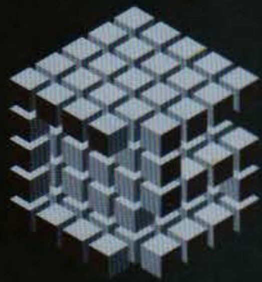
An animation pipeline, Morpheme consists of a lightweight, cross-platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and PC engine, called Morpheme:runtime, which is integrated within the main game engine, and an authoring environment, morpheme:connect. This is uses a visually-based interface where animation logic and blends can be created, edited and tweaked using transition graphs and blend trees and checked using the 3D previewer. Support is included for game pad control, Lua scripting and morpheme is compatible with NaturalMotion's more complex procedural Euphoria animation technology.
www.naturalmotion.com



NaturalMotion's Morpheme animation package is typical of the new generation of products which combine a runtime engine with visual authoring tools that can be integrated into artists' existing animation workflows







Two of the first games to use EA's ANT animation authoring and runtime engine are urban battler *Def Jam: Icon* and the hugely stylistic *NBA Street Homecourt*. More realistic tests will come with this year's versions of *Madden* and *FIFA* however

Product:	**Havok Behavior**
Company:	**Havok**

Arising from the company's expertise in rigid-body and ragdoll physics, and supporting its Physics and Animation products, Havok Behavior consists of an art-based composition tool for animators and a runtime SDK for programmers. It's built on an asset management system that encompasses assets such as rigs, skin/mesh bindings and animation clips, while the creation tool exposes animation dynamics such as hierarchical finite state machines and blending trees in an intuitive manner. The SDK integrates with the in-game animation system and also enables you to link into the in-game artificial intelligence so events can change the animations that are triggered. **www.havok.com**

Significantly, this agreement marks a new focus for Autodesk, which is looking to expand outside its well known modelling and animation tools such as 3ds Max and Maya to provide more game-specific technologies. In the case of ANT, it licensed EA its HumanIK engine, which enables features such as making sure characters' feet are correctly pinned to the ground, as well as providing a robust pipeline with other Autodesk products so animators require less input from programmers to get their work up and running in-game.

Other key elements of ANT highlighted by LaBounta and senior animation director **Eric Armstrong** included the ability to better model the biomechanics of the human body, combined with artificial intelligence that better directs how a player in a team would react to typical match conditions.

The result is a system that allows animators to blend and layer character movement on top of a foundation that automatically deals with issues such as modelling changes in centre of gravity as players run, jump and dribble, as well as the independent movement of different body parts. Procedural animation for representing different emotional states is another goal.

Significantly, the flexibility of ANT, which enables animators to tweak in-game movement with banks of sliders, means fewer motion capture clips are required, as well as improving the controllability of games.

"We get a more responsive character because instead of having to wait for each clip to end before transitioning between them, we can blend between them in a more fluid manner," Armstrong said. "That makes it more believable, because human motion isn't cyclical."

Perhaps what's most interesting about ANT, though, is LaBounta's assertion that what's most important in terms of the overall results is the quality of the reference material, typically motion capture, used to create the animation clips in the first place.

Concurring with the attitude that you only get out what you put in is **Torsten Reil**, CEO of UK animation experts NaturalMotion. The company has had a busy month, revealing its Euphoria procedural animation system has been licensed by Rockstar Games. Specific titles weren't mentioned but it's believed Euphoria is being used in *GTA IV*.

At GDC, NaturalMotion also announced the availability of its third animation tool, morpheme. Unlike Euphoria, which generates character animation depending on the exact in-game conditions, morpheme works in a similar way to ANT. It's an animation pipeline tool, consisting of authoring tools and an in-game engine, which is designed to enable animators to get the most out of their existing workflow.

"The goal is to get consistent performance from disparate sources of animation," Reil explained. As many studios have built up large libraries of animation over the years, one important feature for the new breed of tools is they must let animators continue use such existing assets as efficiently as possible.

Reil also says many problems with game animation today result from the disconnection between animators and the programmers who often end up implementing animation within a game engine. Small discrepancies in timing for example, which might not be obvious to the programmer, can make all the different to the quality of the output.

And that's why all companies offering animation tools, physics provider Havok is also competing with NaturalMotion and Autodesk in this area, are stressing WYSIWYG previewing and pipeline-ability built around robust animation engines so that animators can be confident the motion they painstakingly create will be correctly imported into the final game.



Demonstrating one of the key issues with realistic animation is how to stop a character's feet sliding around the floor. Inverse kinematics are often used to pin feet to the floor, but if an animation system isn't flexible enough to elegantly get the rest of the skeleton in position, this approach can also create problems

Product:	**HunanIK**
Company:	**Autodesk**

One of the products gained when Autodesk bought Alias (indeed it was also one of the products gained when Alias originally bought Kaydara), it's taken a while for the company to get its head around HumanIK. One reason is unlike products such as 3ds Max and Maya, HumanIK is a runtime engine component that developers need to integrate within their own game engine. This requires a different sort of business model and support than Autodesk has typically offered. But following the recent EA deal, and previous work with Ubisoft, it seems Autodesk will be looking to ramp up interest in this dynamic character animation technology, which as its name suggests uses a inverse kinematic approach to creating in-game motion. It also offers a re-targetting option so animation can be applied to skeletons of differing size and hierarchies, and enables characters to dynamically adapt to their physical in-game environments. **www.autodesk.com**



YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

SHEEP AND GIRAFFES

I'm away from Wales and I'm missing my sheepies! I'm out in San Francisco while writing this, having given a little talk at the Game Developers Conference a couple of days ago, and yesterday again at Google. Google looks like a really fun place to work, it's full of people who seem to be very happy to be there, and there are little electric scooters provided for people to zip around the campus on. Plus they have a few old arcade cabinets scattered about the place (I was able to have a game of *Marble Madness* while waiting to set up the gear for my talk). They also have some really good canteens, and all the food is free. Talking to some Googleites when I was there I got the impression that the company want to keep its employees so happy that they never want to go home!

My American presentations were also an opportunity to show off my Xbox Live Arcade game *Space Giraffe* in public for the first time, and the reaction to it seemed to be universally good, even eliciting a few chuckles from the audience at times. I'm really happy with the response to the demos and with progress in the game in general. I'm up to level 64 (out of 100) now. Level 64 is simply insane the first time you see it.

The *Giraffe* alpha testers have certainly been having fun with the game, and there are some decent high-scores appearing on the leaderboards; none so illustrious as mine though. But then I guess I have a slight advantage over the others.

We're on the home stretch now – I just have to finish off those levels and put in the bonus rounds, and while I'm doing that Giles is working on all the necessary stuff for us to be compliant with Microsoft's specs for Live Arcade titles. This is a lot of work on its own – for example we are having translations of the game's text done into French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese. It's a bit more exacting than it was back in the old Jaguar days when all we had to support was English (well, English of a sort – I remember being distinctly irked when I was told to go through all my game text changing the spelling of 'colour' to 'color'. Grrr...)

It turns out that Microsoft's definition of 'alpha' is rather different from ours, too. I pretty much assumed it meant 'chuck out a version of the game that's pretty much fully working but not yet feature complete', so that's what we did. Looking at their published definition of what alpha is, though, looks a lot to me like a finished game – all levels in, all of the Achievements in, pretty much all functionality in – hey, to me that's pretty much the whole game. Since they actually have the right to reject a game at the alpha stage, I can imagine that standard appearing pretty daunting to some developers since they'd pretty much have to write the whole thing and then have to run the risk of it being rejected. I'm not at all worried about that for *Space Giraffe*, though, since it's plainly evident that it's rather good, even if I do say so myself.

As alpha code goes, *Space Giraffe* is looking solid as a rock; lots of games have been played on it and I haven't had a single crash bug report at all, it's looking to be stable as a horse's house. All it really means for us is that we're likely to pass several milestones pretty much simultaneously when we do submit alpha – it'll likely pass the alpha, code complete and content complete stages all at once. We're still aiming to get the game ready for submission to Microsoft by the end of March; realistically, I suppose that could be pushed out to the middle of April but I certainly hope it doesn't end up any later than that. Once it's made it through the approval process I think there's about a six-week pipeline to get to the actual release date.

> "I'm going to have a great big fat party the day that you can actually log onto Live Arcade and download the giraffe"

I'm going to have a great big fat party the day that you can actually log onto Live Arcade and download the giraffe.

However, there's still a fair bit of hard work between now and then, and I'll be straight back into it as soon as I return to the UK, bar a couple of days to get past the jetlag over the intervening weekend. I think in that couple of days I shall play some more *Crackdown* (which I got just before I went away and which I am thoroughly enjoying) and finally get a look at what all the fuss is about with *MotorStorm* (being as I picked up a PS3 while here in San Francisco – it would have been silly not to, really, as it's cheaper here than it is at home plus it doesn't have the crippled backward compatibility the European models have, so I'll be able to play *Katamari Damacy* on it which was the main reason for the dust coming off the PS2 at my house anyway). There really appears to be absolutely no shortage of PS3s out here in the US; just about every game shop I've been in had them in stock.

But I think most of all I am looking forward to just getting back to Wales, the sheepies, a decent cup of tea, curry, the pub and that sweet, sweet giraffe.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser




BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

TOO OLD TO PLAY?

The world's first videogame, *Spacewar!*, was invented by **Steve Russel**, who headed a team working on a PDP-1 mainframe at MIT in 1962. When I spoke with Russel recently, he told me he no longer played games – but not because of his age. He'd always preferred writing code. "It's the people making the games who have the most fun of all," he said.

In 1999, only nine per cent of gamers were 50 or over. Last year, the Entertainment Software Association reported, that percentage had jumped to 19 per cent. Statistics are boring, and statistics about games – which are supposed to be nothing but fun – seem even more boring in comparison. But, in the hard-nosed business which underpins our pastime, these market figures are crucial. According to one survey, a quarter of the UK population will be over 60 within the next decade, and game developers are starting to take note.

> A quarter of the UK population will be over 60 within the next decade, and game developers are starting to take note

"Older players have different life experiences" an aging **Warren Spector** said at the Montreal International Games Summit, 2005. "And they want and demand different kinds of content. Skateboarding? Not part of my life, particularly. Urban thuggery? Not interested. Extreme sports? It's been a while for me."

One man who agrees is **Robert Bovington**. Bovington, who turned 70 last year, has rediscovered gaming. Back in the '80s, he played *Wizardry* with his son on the Apple II. But most recently, it's been his new Nintendo Wii that has changed his life. "The nice thing the Wii's done, which is amazing, it's brought family groups together. Which has never happened, in my experience of computer systems or games. We have three generations – grandchildren, children and me – all playing together. My wife plays, my grandchildren play, my children play. It's taking my grandson away from his PlayStation in his bedroom; now he's coming into the lounge to play *Wii Sports*. When we have a family get together, up comes the screen. To hell with watching television!"

For his age, Bovington is unusually technically literate. His company, Lion Systems, developed custom computer hardware for banks, hospitals, oil rigs and the military. Twenty years ago, when Lion was bought out by Atlantic Systems, he went into early retirement. But he is reflective of a new, more active older generation. He didn't settle down. He's working on an astronomy degree, and takes an active interest in his son Justin Robertson's virtual world business, Rivers Run Red. He's 70, but he looks in his early 60s and according to Nintendo, he's younger still: "There's this lovely integrated fitness regime, and it tells you what age you're supposed to be. I'm supposed to be 52, which is fantastic." Bovington's less technical friends don't have their own Wiis, but it's not because they can't use it. They just can't get hold of one.

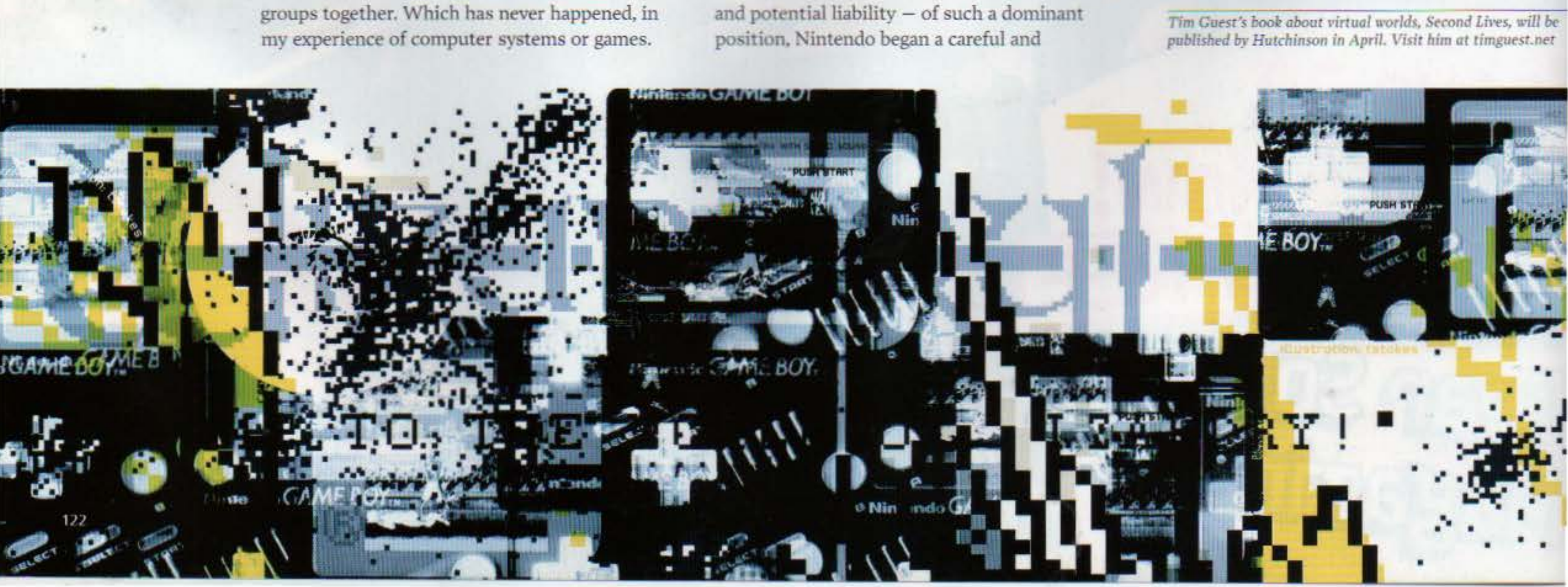
The context of Nintendo's decision to widen the appeal of console gaming, stretches far back into the company's history. In the '80s and early '90s, Nintendo dominated the massive US console market, with the three most popular games systems: the Game Boy, the NES and the SNES. In 1988, cautious of the responsibility – and potential liability – of such a dominant position, Nintendo began a careful and comprehensive system of censorship, for the US only. "Nintendo is concerned that our products do not contain material that society as a whole deems unacceptable," the Nintendo America Video Game Content Guidelines stated. Among those references or themes banned from US Nintendo games were: sex, random or gratuitous violence (see the SNES release of *Mortal Kombat*), smoking and alcohol, religious images (including the notorious removal of any visible crosses in games) – even political statements of any kind. The result was a 'cutesy' reputation, that by the mid-'90s seemed to appeal more to children than anyone else. From 1994, the US Entertainment Software Ratings board stepped in, and Nintendo relaxed its censorship, but the 'cute' reputation remained.

Still, its experience with cuteness and accessibility helped in its new drive to appeal to a wider range of gamers, culminating most recently in the Wii and the DS. "I don't like the hit and thrust games," Bovington says. "Most of it is crash and bang, which I don't really need. My grandson is being seduced away from 'men at arms' games to play socially, on the Wii."

After all, retirees have as much time to kill as teenagers, and games give them a new way to fill their time. "We used to go swimming," Bovington says, "but when the weather's bad, where are you? In the house. That's when the Wii comes out."

In his experience, the crucial physical elements of the Wii extend their benefits even beyond the living room. "The games are great, but the best thing is it can take you out of it, and put you back in to the real environment. It introduces kids to sport. My grandchildren are asking me: 'When can I go bowling?' That can only be a plus. All the criticisms we've had in the past will now change."

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net





BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

A MOMENT OF NOSTALGIA

I'm all too aware that I've been frightfully horrid to the PlayStation 3 in recent columns. But following the system's launch I've actually started to feel sorry for Sony.

I've no reason to feel sorry for them, of course, because they're a large, multinational corporation whose job it is to eat our money. Indeed, from this early point of view the PS3 seems to have sold reasonably well, even if the public relations battle is far from won. Nevertheless, I feel it is time for some positivity around my parts, and there's nothing quite so warming as nostalgia.

To this end I've been sat here, stroking my special beard and mulling over some of my most perfect gaming moments. Intriguingly, it struck me sideways how few of them were deliberate aspects of the prescribed gameplay. By which I mean that the things I have most enjoyed about many of my favourite games have been the things they don't tell you in the instruction manual. The happy accidents, the signs of a game engine veering off in ways its creators could never have anticipated.

> You haven't played the game properly until you've locked David Tennant and Jean-Luc Picard in room and forced them to copulate

And here – because you're probably aching to read them – is they:

Half-Life 2 (PC): I'm fairly certain I'm not alone in this, but I can't believe that Valve ever predicted quite how much fun the gravity gun would be. I don't know whether the concept was there from the start, or whether it was a minor element of the weapons arsenal which got bumped up at some latter point of development, but the first time I tossed the ball to Dog is up there with my first ever Mario spin-jump. Indeed, my one disappointment with *Half-Life 2* (actually, more with *Half-Life 2: Episode One*) is that the gravity gun wasn't explored more fully. The physics engine is so brilliant – and has yet to be surpassed – that a less-linear, sandbox game featuring gravity gun and physics would the greatest thing ever. Please do that, Valve.

Dog's Life (PS2): I consider this an overlooked gem. Not because it was a particularly good game, but it is the only example of so-called 'interactive entertainment' wherein you can do a poo, pick it up in your mouth, and run around with it before throwing it at a passer-by.

World Games (C64): I never owned a C64, being a dyed-in-the-wool Spectrumface until the Atari ST came along. Nevertheless, my friend Phil had one, and I would go round to his house at weekends purely to play *World Games*. Specifically, I would go round to his house to play the cliff diving event in *World Games*. And not even to play it properly, which would have required me to contort my fingers into horrible shapes and learn the controls. I just liked making the diver crash head-first into the rocks, thus braining him to death and scaring away the nearby seagull. Looking back, far too much of my youth was spent doing this.

Crackdown (360): *Crackdown* is my current passion. I kind of get the sense that, perhaps, it's not actually a very good game. There's lots to admire about it on a technical level, but in most respects it's pretty charmless. And yet I've spent more time on *Crackdown* than any other game this year. The core experience – running around a lovely, *GTA*-esque city taking out gang bosses – is by far the dullest part of the experience. Far more interesting is your character's superhuman agility, the climbing frame that is the city itself, and the ability to upgrade your abilities by collecting orbs.

Now, I'm typically the sort of person who avoids collectables in games, and yet I have bee obsessively scouring every last inch of *Crackdown* to hear those elusive, pulsing tones. I'm currently on over 400 agility orbs, and I'm buggered if I know where the remaining ones are. If a game can get a collect-o-phobe like me collecting then it's doing something right.

Dead Rising (360): Perhaps the greatest recent example of sandbox thinking, I actually believe *Dead Rising* to be a rubbish game shoe-horned into one of the best worlds ever conceived. If not, in fact, the best. I confess that I haven't even played through the game the whole way, and yet I'm still going back to it to run through zombie hordes with lawnmowers, put horse masks on undead heads and play zombie golf.

The Sims series (PC): It is impossible to play these games without inputting the unlimited money cheat and/or wrapping your Sims in a combination of skins you've downloaded off the internet. You haven't playe this game properly until you've locked David Tennant and Jean-Luc Picard in an airless room forced them to copulate, and then watched the slowly pee themselves to death.

Premier Manager 97 (PC): Yes, it's an old one. No, it's not the far superior *Championship Manager*. But it is the one we used to have installed on our office PC at Digitiser. We weren't interested in how our team was doing; we just liked changing the names of the players and laughing during the commentaries as Stink Penis crossed to Sex Vicar. Until the day we go caught by our features editor, that is.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox



Issue 174

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ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Crackdown – a videogame standout moment

Admit it. Who else was a cynic about the *Halo 3/Crackdown* link up? I felt that MS were trying to shift a poor game on the promise of the *Halo 3* beta, and why not?

My thoughts now? I love this game. You can do what you want, when you want, how you want. If you want to just drive around and look at the view you can, there are no limits from the outset. If you want to climb all and sundry, you can. It really is up to you.

The superhero style leveling-up rewards you unlike any *GTA* game, it gives you the tools to climb that bit higher, drive that bit faster, make a few more things blow up... but its not too slow or too fast, just really well balanced.

And the best bit: climbing the Agency Tower. The absence of traffic noise, the wind, the subtle music, the tense, nervous ledge shuffling. A real standout gaming moment. And when you fall off it actually made me wince on impact. I can't remember the last time a game did that.

G3PO

As the world of virtual warfare has moved ever closer to the real thing, one aspect of computer warfaring has left me more than a little befuddled. I call it the 'spring-heeled assassin' phenomenon. This type of soldier can jump and shoot untiringly, producing games that feel like a Jerry Bruckheimer production of Bambi. When games such as *GoldenEye* allowed for untiring circling of the enemy, I always believed that Andy McNab types could actually accomplish such a tiring feat. However, my tireless investigation of SAS techniques has revealed that jumping while shooting is not only overly energy-sapping but also completely stupid! So I hereby would like to call for the end of the 'spring-heeled assassin'... although I'm sure Nike is now working on turning warfaring virtuality into actuality.

Ben Keegan

Bruckheimer does Bambi? Count us in.

"Sony, through arrogance or naivety, has turned up late to the party and tried to copy what it's seen (Xbox Live and motion sensing being the most obvious)"

If Alex Westworth (**E**174) is a teacher, I suggest that he grows up and shows his pupils how to be balanced and unbiased when discussing a subject. What does he hope to gain by calling Microsoft's console a can opener or a washing machine? The 360 leaves the decision of whether to buy additional functions to the user, and in its basic form it's a fine high-definition gaming machine with online and media-hub capabilities. The PS3 forces the extras on the buyer.

Secondly, he tries to demonstrate that 'most games that are on the 360 are the same game' by choosing half a dozen examples from the same genre, ignoring the racing games, the boxing games, the platformers, the tennis, golf and party games, and indeed anything that doesn't fit his prejudices. I could make exactly the same claim of the Wii by just picking out all the 'kiddie' games. By ignoring the burgeoning HDTV market, Nintendo has shown that it is clinging to the past: just watch the rush to catch up next time around.

Of course Microsoft isn't perfect, and in my opinion the launching of two machines (one with an HDD and one without) has severely limited the 360's future prospects, but as a second foray into the cut-throat world of consoles, where brand loyalty and childish insult-hurling are the norms, the 360 is an excellent buy and is doing pretty well.

Andrew Howlett



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

By the time I reached the end of Alex Westworth's letter (**E**174), my jaw was hanging slack. I'm sorry, Mr Westworth, did someone from Microsoft come round to your house one cold, dark night and physically abuse you?

I'm not an Xbox 360 fanboy as I have also have a Wii and have a PS3 on pre-order, but to describe the machine as useless and only having one game... Words fail me!

Gears Of War is nothing like *Oblivion* or *Crackdown* or *Fight Night 3* or *Geometry Wars* or *Cloning Clyde* or *Hexic* or *PGR3*. Need I go on?

At least the Xbox 360 had a decent number of exclusive releases on its launch day instead of games I've already played months ago (*COD3*, *Oblivion* and *FN3*). The simple fact is that Sony, through arrogance or naivety, has turned up late to the party and tried to copy what it's seen (Xbox Live and motion sensing being the most obvious).

As for the Xbox 360 being a failure in Japan (which it is), this is a peculiarly cultural thing and nothing to do with games. If it was, the PS3 would fail as well, as it has launched with the same games the 360 has had on its roster for months (see above). As for the assumption that no one over 40 will buy a 360... well I AM 40 and a lot of my friends (online and offline) are in the 35-45 age bracket. Y'know, the ones who remember playing *Space Invaders* when it was new and shiny, the ones who've been playing games longer than you've been on this planet!

Again, your bias and assumptions show themselves by dismissing the older gamer outright. If you think your argument stands up for scrutiny, change 360 to PS3 and then read it again. On a similar note, why would anyone over 40 want to buy a PS3? You're just not making sense I'm afraid (your point about wireless connectivity and HD-DVD is a valid one, however).

The reason you want to get it off your chest in **Edge** is that standing in

front of a group of stick-thin, pre-pubescent males and having your carefully crafted argument picked apart using reason and judgement would, I believe, be totally embarrassing.
Marcus Waldock

With the Game On exhibition at the Science Museum having recently ended, it seems an appropriate time to reflect upon the event. The hour and a half allowed inside seemed a little short, especially given the vast array of titles begging to be played, whether through a sense of nostalgia or discovery. But it's easy to accept that the time limit was to restrict hordes of people crowding the machines.

The fact the exhibition took place at all is to be applauded. As is frequently decried on the pages of every gaming magazine or website, the common misconception of gamers is that all we do is kill and maim virtual people in virtual worlds. There may have been a 'shrine' to the *Grand Theft Auto* series at Game On, but it was good to see a wide collection of consoles and games that would hopefully convince people that there is more to gaming than *GTA*.

Yet for all the hope of this event bringing gaming to a wider audience, the environment in which it was held left something to be desired. While the Science Museum itself is a real spectacle, Game On felt like the dimly lit, noisy arcades of old – albeit lacking in cigarette smoke. An accurate atmosphere for the *Space Invaders* machine, but with the next/current generation of the PS3 and Wii on display, it felt as if more could have been done to reflect the games housed in each separate section.



Female gamers are less interested in cute, pretty characters – as seen in games such as *Viva Piñata* – than in decent multiplayer and co-op options, argues David Gentry

Game On was much like the *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* text game it had on display – not a great visual spectacle, but highly entertaining beneath it all. Then again, as it was only a temporary event, expecting any more than this may have been too optimistic. One can only hope that the event (or something similar) is given a permanent home somewhere in the UK, in stylish surroundings, as collecting games acts as a good education for new gamers, or those too young to have been there in the early days.
Craig Williams

"How I wept when Double Agent was released. Not only had the split-screen co-op option been left off, it had been replaced by 'online only' options"



***MGS4* inspired Vassili Christodoulou to call for the emancipation of games developers**

That's it, I've had enough. Yes, yes, yes, the new generation of consoles is very exciting and all that. Better graphics, larger games, more possibilities and probably games that are so in-depth that you have to quit your job just to explore the first island. But that doesn't help my relationship.

You should understand I don't have the usual problem with my girlfriend. No. My girlfriend loves to play games.

She doesn't choose a game because it's cute and girly and has pretty pink horses for her to care for. She chooses it because of one very important aspect – and one I can relate to. She loves multiplayer titles, specifically co-op.

I bought her a 360 last year for her birthday. She hardly touched the thing as all the games I bought with it offered one player only, choosing instead to place it next to the original Xbox as she played *Halo 2* and *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* due to their co-op options.

Being incredibly clever, though, I pre-ordered *Double Agent*. How I cackled in the knowledge that she would finally love the 360 as she battled through the levels with me. How I wept when it was released and she looked at me, utterly disappointed. Not only had the splitscreen co-op option been left off, it had been replaced by 'online only' options.

I have a horrible feeling this is the way videogames are heading and I for one think it's a huge blow. I've always believed multiplayer to be one of the most important aspects of gaming, from evenings of drunken hilarity with my friends through to lunch hours spent on *GTA* killing my work colleagues (at least Rockstar seems to understand what the PSP was designed for).

Does this mean that in order to play any form of multiplayer game with my girlfriend (let alone co-op, which seems to be added on at the end of development, if at all), I'm expected to go to another room or house and play online? Or do developers think I'd prefer to play against random spotty 13-year-olds who spend more time hurling abuse from the anonymity of their bedrooms? It makes the phrase 'social gaming' into one hell of a joke.

I assume I'm not the only one who finds this idea depressing (at least Nintendo seems to have noticed the real reason a large number of people still play games and seems to be trying to take a step in the right direction). Developers harp on about bringing more people (in particular females) into the hobby while constantly pushing them away with little or no interest in why they didn't play in the first place.

There's a slightly happy end to this letter. My girlfriend went out and bought *Gears Of War* purely for its co-op and is now happily sitting with her sister loving every minute of it, while I bitterly write this letter next to a dust-covered copy of *Double Agent*.
David Gentry

This is a key issue which rarely gets the development focus it deserves. Hopefully this month's DS Lite will increase your social gaming repertoire.

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Topic: Have a chat, muck about

I been thinking of a game, open world, like *GTA*, with the beauty of *Alan Wake/Just Cause*. It would be full of sandbox stuff like playgrounds, roller coasters, dirt buggies, ski areas, paragliding, scuba diving, frisbee, trains, canoes, mountain bikes. It'd be like an MMO and have absolutely no goals or acheivements or levels. It would just be a place to go and chill out with peeps off your friends list. You could choose who you can chat to once logged in and just go for a walk, or drive your minibus with ten friends up a mountain so you can all watch the sunset and have a picnic to wind down after four hours of *Gears*.

It would have that tactile feel of *LittleBigPlanet*, but the true wide open vistas of *GTA*.

Have I just described *Second Life*?

The graphics would have to be bloody amazing to satisfy me, draw distance being of great importance. You could also carry a boom box around that plays streaming music from your 360 so you could share that with your mates, it would have a realistic audible range so you could walk off it was say, Akon or Aerosmith.

It would also be free, and on the 360, your Live subscription would pay for it and the addition of new play areas/stuff which would be added at the same time as any dashboard updates. Think of it as a 360 hub, chill out zone to go to between games and socialise without any competitive element.
Turtle O Wurtle

I think most seasoned gamers have thought about this at one point or another, it's definitly something to aspire to and an idea that would really sit well with me. I like the idea of driving your friends up a mountain, but knowing me I'd send the bus off a cliff on purpose or something.
Speedhaak

It's a great idea, the problem is that every new activity or experience within this world lends itself to micro-transactions. I can't see the incentive for Microsoft or Sony to give you this for free.
Aye Are

Continued

Your Oedipal reading of *Metal Gear Solid* [E173] got me thinking about whether anyone makes games for adults. As a kid, my passion for games, books, plays and films stemmed from the same source: they all gave me the chance to think like someone else, go somewhere incredible, be part of an adventure. But although the books I read have got smarter as my mind has matured, most game designers don't cater for the older market in the same way. They churn out the same shallow escapism for adults as they supply for kids, only switch cute monsters for corpses. *MGS* is no exception.

I'm 20 now and while I love gaming deeply, almost nothing on the shelves stimulates me the way that it used to. I don't want to have to give up gaming, so in my arrogance, here's my radical manifesto for aspiring designers: games don't need to be built on fun any more.

Why should they be? The most popular contributions to the arts are rarely fun; we love them because they make us think and make us feel. With their interactive element, games have the potential to affect the player in a way passive art forms can't even attempt, and yet no one even bothers to aspire to these heady heights.

If Spielberg can sustain two hours of repulsive cinematic horror in Saving Private Ryan, why can't we see an anti-war game where the player is cast as a war photographer in the Middle East selling photographs of corpses to the Sunday rags? No, it won't entertain, but it will make a massive emotional impact to actually feel like you're part of a war zone.

Why can't we have a survival horror game with the originality and intellect of The Shining? Real ethical dilemmas that go beyond 'Shall I be a good Barbarian warrior or an evil one?' Why don't we still have catharsis, and unhappy endings that go beyond a 'game over' screen?

Games don't have to be entertaining to be rewarding, but it's so instilled into the mindset of players and designers alike that it seems unlikely to change. I've had it with disposable corridor shooters and high-fantasy RPGs.

How many more adults would play *Metal Gear Solid* if it really was an Oedipal tragedy? Isn't it about time designers threw off their chains and showed us what videogames are really capable of?

Vassili Christodoulou

It's serious games that are leading this charge. Fleeing the Janjaweed as a nine-year-old in *Darfur Is Dying* is terrible and horrifying in a way *Silent Hill* will never be able to match, for all its sophistications.

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Topic: The Hamlet myth

It has been said that no one would want to play a Hamlet game because you're destined to die at the end. Apart from the fact that there is a Hamlet game and people do play it, there's something else wrong with this way of thinking about games. Take *Metal Gear Solid* for example. You spend a healthy chunk of the game activating the final boss. Surely on my second playthrough I would've missed that bit out and made the ending easier for myself? Of course not. I'm not given the choice and I don't care.

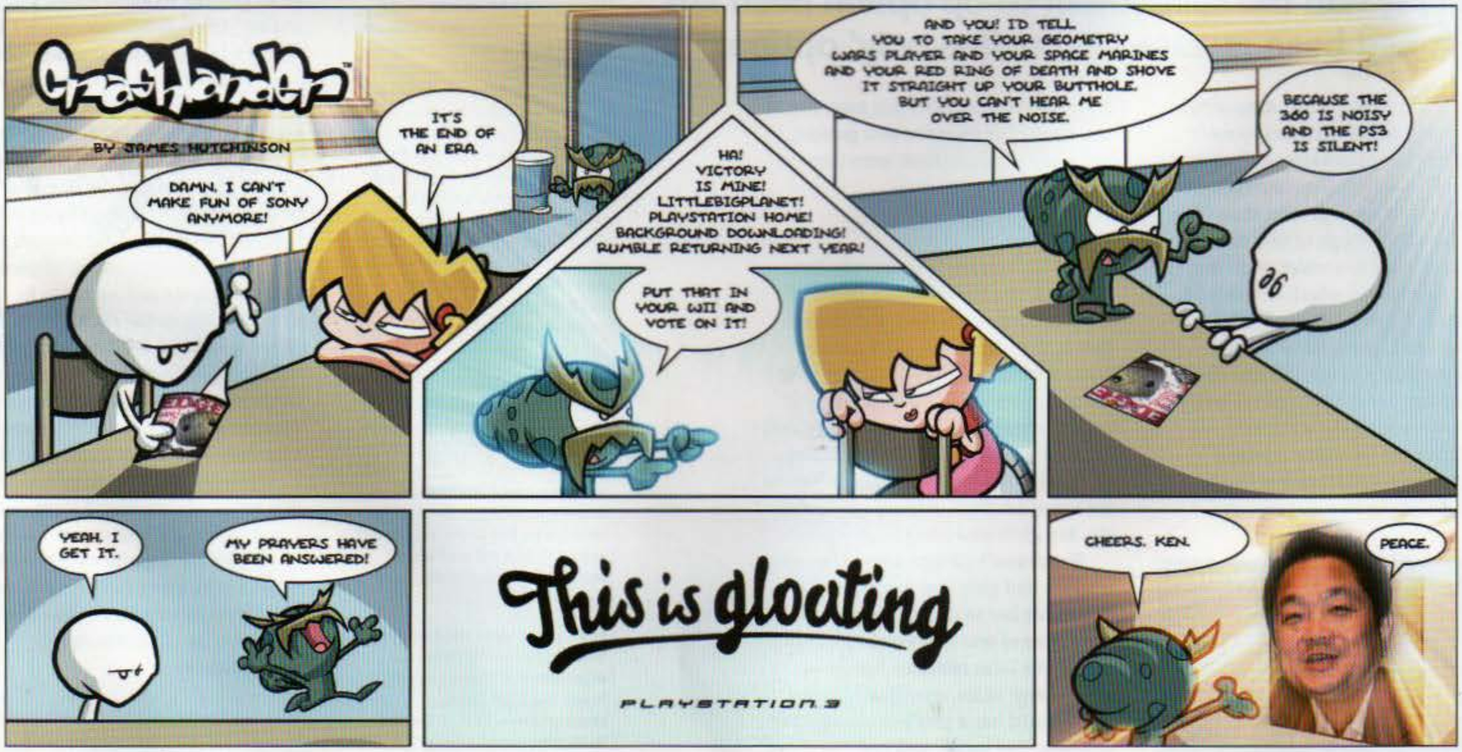
I never care about the princess I'm supposed to save. All I care about are the tasks laid in front of me by the designers.

Freethinker

Thanks for ruining the play for me.

Bombfrog

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